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Introduction

"Of course you can't read it .It is a looking glass-book. You are only meant to hold it and look as if you'd read it. That is the meaning of criticism "(Peter Ackroyd-*English Music*)

The main purpose of this essay has been to reveal the coherence and relevance of narcissistic patterns in the fiction and public life of Oscar Wilde ,not from a psychoanalytical, but from a literary perspective.

The psychological definitions of narcissism have been considered insofar as they have helped define the reader's horizon of expectation by illustrating the wide-spread prejudices on the subject, in other words the narcissistic taboo, and the originality of Wilde's narcissistic philosophy has been revealed both in this wider context and against the background of Victorian society.

The aesthetic prejudices of readers have also been taken into account and Wilde's narcissism has been compared to that of the French dandies with whom he is associated in our minds ;thus his aesthetic narcissism has been defined in opposition to the prevailing cultural norms and by comparison to the decadent movement.

Considerable attention has been paid to Wilde's views on the ideal reader of his work and this essay has tried to reconcile the writer's demand for creative criticism, regarded as an art-form in its own right, with the present-day conventions of the genre and the demand for objectivity and scientific methods of research.

For the sake of narrative simplicity, the paper has been structured around five narcissistic experiences, presented in their logical sequence, from the revelation of one's idealised image to the self-annihilation for the sake of one's image-in other words the initial and final moment of the myth of Narcissus- while the mirroring stage has been considered from three different perspectives: that of the dandy, the lover and the artist.

All of these narcissistic moments ,which lead to the creation of narcissistic types, are differentiated by the public into acceptable and unacceptable ones: to the former category belong the narcissism of youth or the narcissistic youth, the narcissism of love

(which is however regarded as a part of love and not as its essence) and the narcissism of art or the narcissistic artist, while to the latter category belong the narcissism of the dandy and the narcissistic act of suicide.

The paper will examine the way in which Wilde combines these themes, in order to make the unacceptable seductive: the first chapter for instance will discuss Wilde's rejuvenation of the dandy and show how narcissism is made acceptable by means of the poetic licence provided by youth.

A major part of the essay will be dedicated to the exploration of rhetorical tricks, innovative techniques and combinations as the one previously referred to, proving not only the relevance and coherence of narcissistic patterns in the writings of Wilde, but also their artistic value.

Enough has perhaps been said about the themes and perspective of this essay to help the reader decide whether he or she wishes to turn to the first chapter.

For the fashion-minded reader, we recommend the second chapter, which discusses the dandy's self-fashioning techniques and reveals the role of accessories in inventing a personality. The romantically-minded reader is advised to meditate on the third chapter, with its chilling revelations on the narcissistic and artificial aspects of love, defined by Wilde as "a form of the imagination", while the aesthetically-minded reader wishing to trace the unity of artistic thought through the various artistic mediums might wish to scan the fourth chapter, which discusses Wilde's use of painters and paintings to illustrate his own narcissism. The last chapter is not recommended on account of its depressing content and has only been included for the sake of narrative completeness.

This being said, the reader can now make an informed decision-hopefully that of performing his own creative criticism of this essay. To encourage the reader, we remind him of Wilde's observation that the value of criticism does not depend on the value of the work being reviewed and that any material may serve the imaginative critic -so why not this one?

Falling in Love or The Critic as Artist

“When one is in love, one always begins by deceiving oneself and always ends by deceiving others. That is what the world calls a romance”(Oscar Wilde-*The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

The story of Wilde may be told as that of a man who fell in love with his ideal image, pursued it and made it immortal in his fiction and who preferred to die rather than be separated from it, in other words as the perfect narcissistic romance.

No sooner have I written this sentence than I am approached by the reader who is anxious to know what meaning I attribute to the word narcissism-a not entirely unjustified question, considering that my whole essay will be more or less built around this concept.

The difficulty here is that the word is an excellent one, endowed with all the wrong meanings. Its extreme popularity is due to Freud who in his anxiety to clear psychoanalysis from any presumptions of subjectivity, made it an umbrella term meant to cover all the enemies of reason-from artists to women and children, with a somewhat wilful inclusion of primitive peoples and beasts of preyⁱ.

Both the negative connotations and the generalising assumptions have been retained by contemporary psychologists ,reaching a climax with Heinz Kohut and Reuben. Fineⁱⁱ who postulate an inherent narcissism in everyone, the difference being only of degree. The psychological aspects of the term(which has come to designate a personality disorder, a special type of object choice and a way of relating to others)are indeed so prevalent that Jeffrey Berman who examines seven extremely influential modern novels so as to prove that: "Along with love, battle and jealousy, narcissism must take its place among the prime themes of literature", is nevertheless induced to analyse it in psychological terms, applying psychoanalysis not only to the writers themselves, but even to the characters and thus making one conclude with Wilde that it is intolerable that "things made simply out of wood and coloured wax, and worked mechanically by wires, should be so unhappy and meet with such misfortunes" ⁱⁱⁱ,as for instance the lack of maternal mirroring or the trauma caused by over-loving parents.

The point of this essay will then be to return narcissism ,as far as possible ,to the realm of mythology and art from which it sprang ,psychological considerations being allowed only to the extent that they are inspiring .No new definition of the term will be

suggested since narcissism, as indeed all fruitful terms, thrives on ambiguity and it is enough to regard it as an open category, such as “novel” or “poem”-definite enough to stimulate discussion and permit a selection of items and indefinite enough to leave room for new developments.

Another sensible question might be why this apparently inadequate term should have been selected. The author of this essay can think of no reason why its meaning-that has already spread in so many directions-could not be extended further ,to accommodate an aesthetic concept since, to quote another Victorian character: “words mean whatever I want them to mean”^{iv}. Nor is there any reason why a term originally-if subconsciously -coined as an insult-could not designate with full propriety a certain type of art-on the contrary, this is in-fact an artistic tradition that we might want to keep .

To clear the ground then, we shall free this beautiful exciting term from its definition and some of its present-day connotations. Bearing in mind the myth, narcissism cannot be defined as (abnormal)self-love, but is clearly not only differentiated from the ego-instincts as Freud himself acknowledges with some reluctance^v ,but is the love of one’s image to the oblivion and eventual destruction of the self through suicide.

This love of one’s image, however, should not be taken literally as the love of one’s appearance, but with that element of idealisation leading to self-refinement that characterises all types of love. The difference between the self-indulgent woman, called narcissistic by Simone de Beauvoir ,and the dandy ,with whom she shares the passion for mirrors, will be discussed in the following chapter-for the moment it is sufficient to say that my intuition is closer to that of Bachelard: Narcissus does not love himself as he is, but he is as he loves himself.

If “to love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance “(e. g. p. 1245) ,and if we accept Wilde’ s statement at the trial that he has never loved anyone but himselfⁱ, we have to complete it by the observation that he loved himself as he really was not and that this love, as any other ,was “fed by the imagination”(p999) and indeed a “form of the imagination”(p1036,*De Profundis*)

Nor can we pass to the discussion of this exciting romance between the artist and his ideal self, as revealed in Wilde’ s fiction before noticing, however briefly, the extreme modernity of Wilde’ s concept of personality as fragmentary and volatile.

Far from being a self-indulgent, naively egotistic artist, he anticipates Lacan's discovery that the image in the mirror, which confers upon us a sense of identity, is a form of fiction in its neatness and frozen perfection, but adds that it is more interesting than our unanalysable self: "it is a humiliating confession, but we are all of us made out of the same stuff. In Falstaff there is something of Hamlet, in Hamlet there is not a little of Falstaff... Where we differ from each other is purely in accidentals: in dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance and the like. The more one analyses people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear. Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called human nature. Indeed, as anyone who has worked among the poor knows only too well, the brotherhood of man is no mere poet's dream, it is a most depressing and humiliating reality" (*The Decay of Lying*-p 1075)

I have quoted this passage at length because it helps clarify the difference between Ovid's story and our modern Narcissus. The mythical hero falls in love with an image because he doesn't know it is an image, nor does he recognise himself in it-while the modern Narcissus, as the dandy, can only fall in love with an image which he knows to be fictitious and revealing his ideal self and not his personality or as Wilde would phrase it: "The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has yet discovered". (p1244, *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*)

The romance between man and an ideal image of his own making springs from a disappointment, indeed from the disbelief in the relevance of personality. But is not all love born from a lack, as Plato argued and can we not be made to agree with Wilde: "it is the feet of clay that make the gold of the image precious"^{vii}?

Perhaps not, but this was the view of the dandy who maintained the cult of beauty and of the idealised self-image alongside the renunciation of all illusions and who provided Wilde with the image that crystallised his own narcissistic romance-an image of identity this time unashamedly fictitious and taken directly from French decadent literature.

The image of the dandy, as created by Huysmans and Baudelaire, seduced the young artist as that of a "well-dressed philosopher" who seemed to hold the keys both to the secrets of life and of art-it is the image with which he identifies, both in his public life and in his fiction. Yet he has the subtlety of combining-or rather appearing to combine-

the disenchanted narcissism of the dandy with that lighter narcissism of youth, to which all is forgiven and by this means approaches a decadent and fairly sterile doctrine to something that is mistaken by the multitude for the “young and beautiful” ideal.

It may be said that while the originality of Picasso’s paintings is given by the artist’s ability to maintain a childlike freshness of perception, the charm of Wilde’s dandies is undoubtedly enhanced by the narcissism of adolescence which they retain into adulthood.

In the next chapters I shall try to show the extent and relevance of Wilde’s narcissism, whose fiction is populated by gorgeous young men, clearly representing his own ideal image.

If, based on the unsuitable definitions discussed before, narcissism is considered an inherent feature of artists^{viii}, this obscures the originality of Wilde which it is my aim to reveal.

Yet before approaching this exciting subject, we shall discuss the techniques and strategies used by the author to make acceptable what is still unacceptable today..

The first of these methods has been already mentioned, namely the rejuvenation of the dandy.

We have to remember that narcissism is generally regarded as acceptable-and indeed commendable- in adolescents. “The most fantastic and exaggerated manner”(p 234,*Birthday of the Infanta*), the sense of everybody else’s “immense inferiority”, the dreaming idleness and the selfishness of an “extremely emotional nature” (p 297, *The Remarkable Rocket*) are all acceptable if not even charming in the adolescent, as in the child. The intuition on narcissism, as expressed for instance in Eminescu’s *Hyperion*, is that of a self-revelation paving the way for object love., as apparent from Elizabeth Jennings’ version of *Narcissus*, a poem which starts with the “crystalline presence, the glorious loving of self and self”, only to reach the predictable conclusion: “for the children, the self is sufficient,/but now, later/There must be a turning away, a turning towards another”.

The only way then, in which narcissism may be retained is by preserving one’s youth.- and one of the most remarkable things about Wilde is the ability to prolong and reinvent his youth so as to avoid this turning away towards the other, which is imperative in the quoted stanza.

At 22, he still possesses the adolescent fantasies of greatness and power^{ix} combined with the fine philosophical temper so typical of youth that "knows everything" (p 1245) or at least so we might be led to believe from this letter written to a friend in which he confesses: "I'll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I'll be famous or if not famous, I'll be notorious. Or perhaps I'll lead the life of pleasure for a time and then-who knows?-rest and do nothing. What does Plato say is the highest end that man can attain here below? To sit down and contemplate the good. Perhaps that will be the end of me too".^x

It will be argued by the perceptive reader that this youthfulness is only a pose and that in this letter we already have a glimpse of Wilde practising his role. To this we might reply with the lines of Lord Goring: "Youth isn't an affectation. Youth is an art." (p 570)

Four years later, Wilde still thrives on his youth "that has nothing, but looks everything" (p 410) and dominates art purely by virtue of his artistic temperament or as he will explain later in *The Critic As Artist*: "It is exactly because a man cannot do a thing that he is the proper judge of it" (p 1154)

That "sense of fable", which all adolescents are said to possess leads him to re-invent himself in a variety of poses and it is not to "imaginary audiences" he plays, but he is able to seduce British and American society.

His youth is of course by this stage only a mask, but as he will argue, masks are more interesting in revealing the essential or ideal self.

All of his dandies will borrow his youthful mask and, like himself, make a point of lying about their age: as Lord Illingworth remarks in horror: "One should never trust a woman who tells one her real age. A woman who would tell one that, would tell one anything" (p 475). This assumed youth is a kind of poetic licence or of a fool's disguise that makes their social critique for instance more acceptable and their follies less relevant.

If the French dandies are fairly isolated figures, such as Des Esseintes, whose room has been specially designed to suggest the cell of a monk, those imagined by Wilde dominate and charm society -and unlike the French decadent that have all the melancholy of sunset^{xi}, those of Wilde herald a new age, more refined and artistic - sometimes referred to as the English Renaissance, sometimes as the Celtic Revival.

Wilde himself was quite aware of this difference, as apparent from a passage in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in which the hero rejoices in his superiority over the protagonist of the French novel (identified by Wilde at the trial as *À rebours*) and which consists in the fact that he has retained his youth and never felt the Parisian's "somewhat grotesque dread of mirrors, and polished metal surfaces and still water" (p. 145)

Of course, as in the case of Dorian Gray, this youthfulness is only apparent and underneath their charming masks the protagonists imagined by Wilde are as sceptical as their French counterparts.

Still, this is an important innovation and one of the explanations for his success in turning what was the hero of an elite into a social success.

But the rejuvenation is not enough to explain the wonderful tolerance of the public for his genius. The Romantic poses and the storm of protests caused by his novel notwithstanding, Wilde is an immensely successful writer in his own lifetime despite the limited appeal of his ideas and his effeminate preciousness that might have shocked or amused the public and which in fact managed to charm them.

As he remarks in this perhaps most often-quoted passage of *De Profundis*: "I was a man who stood in a symbolic relation to the art and culture of my age. I had realised this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realise it afterwards. Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime and have it so acknowledged. It is usually discerned, if discerned at all, by the historian or the critic, long after the man and his age have passed away. With me it was different. I felt it myself and made others feel it" (p. 1017)

The passage makes clear that Wilde's primary interest is not in art, but in art as his ideal mirror. Rather than saying that narcissism is inherent in the artist, as a number of psychologists and art critics tend to think^{xii}, it is more to the point to say that he resorts to art to give full scope to his narcissism, an idea emphasised in these lines: "Art was to me the primal note, which revealed first myself to myself, then myself to the world" (p. 1001)

It is therefore not enough for Wilde to take his love from French literature, as Dorian Gray had taken his from Shakespeare's plays, it is not enough to make it perfect in his fiction, he also wishes to make it immortal and for this he needs to resort to the public, since unlike any other love relationship, in which the illusion can only be spoilt by the

presence of the third as a neutral spectator, the narcissistic relationship between the artist and the image he has fashioned needs to be mirrored through the eyes of the spectator who perfects the illusion by means of his naive faith and who alone can make it eternal.

In *The Portrait of Mr W H*, the writer delights in picturing himself as Shakespeare and we can most certainly image him passionately murmuring to himself "But thy eternal summer shall not fade"-yet in his attempt to make art the mirror of his beloved, he is careful to avoid "the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass"(p. 17)

The harmonious relationship between artist and public is based on a misunderstanding, revealed by Freud as the complicity between reader and writer, both of whom fulfil certain fantasies of power and greatness by means of fiction from which they pretend to extract a purely aesthetic delight, contemptuously referred to by the father of psychoanalysis as "sugar-coating".

The same intuition is expressed in a more restrained manner by Wilde who in the Preface to his novel for instance, is content to remark: "They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty"(p. 17)

As an artist whose own work was motivated by narcissistic ambitions-which he usually designates by the term of individualism.-Wilde is careful to differentiate and protect them from the egotism of the public. The choice of different terms marks Wilde's awareness of the difference between the artist's creative idealising narcissism and the vaguely narcissistic-indeed more suitably called egotistic- expectations of the reader, a distinction that both Freud-and more surprisingly Berman^{xiii}, fail to make.

The conflicting and only half-conscious expectations of the reader are superbly summed up by Wilde in this comment of the Water-Rat-a "critic as artist" avant la lettre who is anxious to know, before committing himself to respectful listening: "Is the story about me? If so, I will listen to it, for I am extremely fond of fiction"(p. 286)

This charming naiveté of the reader is shown to work on different levels: first of all, there is the surreptitious indulgence in fantasies of personal grandeur, an identification with the protagonist of the story only half acknowledged by the reader and hypocritically covered by his pretended aesthetic enjoyment, somewhat similar for instance to the appreciation of nudes "purely" on artistic considerations

Secondly and more interestingly, it has to be realised that what makes this identification possible is precisely the limited creativity and self-knowledge of the

reader who will after all recognise himself in any sufficiently flattering image. Precisely because he lacks an identity of his own.

This is also the predicament of the artist, as we have already discussed, but the artist can fashion his own identity whereas the unimaginative reader is entirely dependent on others for what is and remains-fiction.

In the story we have already quoted, the Water-Rat is comfortingly told that the story could be about him and this is precisely the bait needed by any reader.

As a consummate artist, Wilde is quite capable of charming and tricking his reader into believing that the story which is entirely about the dandy could be about him, the modest short-sighted Philistine. It is on the flattery of this almost shockingly naïve reader that the reputation of even the most remarkable artists is built-on this idea expressed by no less an individualist than Emerson that “In the works of genius we recognise our own rejected thoughts”. It is the romantic fallacy which alone makes us bear the genius of others-the belief that they gave shape to our own deep-buried intuitions and that ,as Hugo and the rest of the Romantics argued, in expressing their innermost thoughts and feelings, they express ourselves.

If the artist can do without the illusion of personality and self ,moving from his individual ambitions to the insane worship of beauty^{xiv}, the public cannot maintain interest in a work of art unless it pretends to reveal the secret of their soul, while in fact it gives them a soul and invents a secret .As Cyril explains in *The Decay of Lying*: “..nations and individuals ,with that healthy natural vanity which is the secret of existence, are always under the impression that it is of them that the Muses are talking ,always trying to find in the mirror of calm dignity of imaginative art some mirror of their own turbid passions”(p 1087)

To sum up then, the artist is purely interested in the creation of beautiful images-in the case of the narcissistic artist ,of idealised self-images .To make these images live in the eyes of mortal men and speak through their lips, he has to make them credible, that is to say acceptable to the public as potential representations.

Nor is this at all difficult for the artist who is also a diplomatist and avoids shocking “Caliban” either by showing or by not showing his face in the glass. Instead, he presents him with a flattering image that he will be pleased to regard as his own.

Still, his narcissism takes issue with the reader who disturbs him not merely by his easily satisfied delusions of self-reflection, but also by the moral considerations he tries

to bring in the field of art. However humble and unimaginative the reader might be, his presence is still something of an obstruction, insofar as he has anything to express other than “unqualified admiration”^{xv} which was Wilde’s definition for the ideal criticism of his work.

If so far we have seen the artist’s attempts to flatter and delude the reader for the sake of his immortality, which only this unimaginative Philistine may confer upon his work, we shall now turn to *The Critic As Artist*, the essay in which Wilde tries to reconcile the reader and artist and indicate the direction of ideal criticism.

Born out of the artist’s frustration with his reviewers, as suggested from the very beginning by the long poetical passage in which Gilbert dreams of the original paradise of art before the emergence of criticism, the essay proposes to restore the freedom of artists by expanding that of the critic.

The writer, disguised as a dandy and betraying the prejudices of his profession by his insistence on the superiority of literature over the other arts, begins by welcoming the egotism of the reader and critic which had previously caused him some annoyance.

What Wilde has in mind is the conversion of unavoidable egotism into artistic narcissism.

Thus the critic is allowed the same freedom in treating fiction as the writer in treating the raw material of life and in a vein anticipating the worst excesses of Reader-Response Criticism, is encouraged to see the work of art as “it really is not “(p 1128) and make it “the starting -point of a new creation” for as Wilde argues:” Who cares whether Mr Ruskin’s views on Turner are sound or not? What does it matter? That mighty and majestic prose of his, so fervid and so fiery-coloured in its noble eloquence, so rich in its elaborate symphonic music, so sure and certain as its best, in subtle choice of word and epithet, is at least as great a work of art as any of those canvases that bleach or rot on their corrupted canvases in England’s Gallery”.(p 1126)

Yet this apparent generosity of the artist towards the critic reminds one of the gift of the Greeks since in praising the creativity of the critic, he makes it a requirement of the profession-and in presenting criticism as art, he blurs the distinction between the two and elegantly denies the objective potential of the former.

Criticism is “the record of one’s soul”, “the only civilised form of autobiography” (p 1125) and so the image of the critic miraculously merges into that of the narcissistic artist. Both the critic and the artist are to live in isolation, each in the world of his

making, only taking its raw material from the external world of fiction in the case of the critic and from life in the case of the artist. The same intuition is expressed by Wilde in a letter: "I believe that at the beginning God made a world for each separate man of us and in that world which is within us one should seek to live".^{xvi}

All of this is of course rather chilling, insofar as it implies the unassailable solitude not only of the artist, but of every human being, the impossibility of communication and interpretation.

The other possibility for criticism is only an ideal, inspired from the ever-present image of the dandy and also from the nostalgia of youth. The critic, if he does not wish to be an artist and reveal his soul in impressionistic criticism, may be a spectator, seeking to contemplate the entire realm of fiction and "realise himself in many different ways" (p 1144). This reminds us of the adolescent stage with its lack of identity that enabled an imaginative identification with all worthy objects, the so-called identity diffusion stage^{xvii}. It reminds us of that fine philosophical temper of the youth who wished to be a judge of all things, seated at the centre with the Immortals and it also reminds us of the dandy with his wish to contemplate everything through the finer medium of art.

The contradictions apparent in the text are those that necessarily undermine the work of all decadent artists-as Lemaire points out in his book on the French dandies, the writer as dandy is torn between the necessary faith of the artist in his own work^{xviii} and the scepticism of the dandy who may indeed prefer art as "slightly less vulgar" than life, but entertains no illusions about its relevance or enduring beauty.

The Critic As Artist is apparently concerned with the relationship between writer and public, but the deeper and insoluble conflict is in fact between writer and his own gorgeous double. This accounts for the pendulum swing in the text, from the belief stated in the first part that "in literature mere egotism is delightful" (p. 1108) and that art expresses and addresses the soul, to the extremely modern idea, that the artist "gains his inspiration from form, and from form purely." His delight in "mere colour, unspoiled by meaning and unallied with definite form" anticipates the experiments of abstract painting while his defence of the poet who can be charming "precisely because he has nothing to say" (p 1148) is confirmed by the intuition of the contemporary poet E. Morgan whose *Opening the Cage: 14 Variations on 14 Words* begins with the lines: "I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry".

In a passage such as the one we have discussed the writer comes indeed very close to the dandy, whose insistence on form hides despair of content and whose freedom from illusions anticipates the existentialists and the absurd theatre of Beckett.

It may be said that the artist is in any case therefore left alone-by the critic as artist and by the critic as dandy. The former wishes to see in art his own reflection, the latter merely wishes to escape the vulgarity of life. Neither has the slightest interest in the artist. The mystery of beauty and the mystery of the artist's soul remain complete and the artist acknowledges with some regret that the Philistines interfere little with his work. He is left quite alone and talking to himself and so he picks again his work and begins to fashion the self-images that will astonish the world.

In this chapter we have postulated narcissism as the starting-point of Wilde's creation and have tried to account for the remarkable success of an unacceptable doctrine by revealing Wilde's tact and his understanding of the reader's expectations. We have watched him set the mood for the introduction of his beloved dandy.

In the next chapters, we shall see the dandy preparing to enter the stage and the dandy on stage.

ⁱ In his book *Narcissism and the Novel*, 1992, Berman reiterates R. Fine's malicious observation that Freud had started his 1914 paper on narcissism while being himself "riddled with narcissistic fears" about the future of his discipline. It is undoubtedly true that in his series of introductory lectures on psychoanalysis, he presents it as the third major blow dealt by science to the human ego, after the heliocentric and the evolutionary theories, and explains the reluctance of the public to embrace the new theory as narcissism or egocentricity, common to all, except the supposedly objective scientist

ⁱⁱ Berman reviews the studies of Heinz Kohut, *Analysis of the Self*, 1971, and *The Search for the Self*, 1978, concluding that "One of Kohut's most far reaching beliefs is that the phenomenon of narcissism, both in its normal and abnormal functions, affects all people." The theory is supported by the findings of R. Fine, who states in his 1986 paper, *Narcissism, The Self and Society*, that "all people are narcissistic; the difference is only one of degree"

ⁱⁱⁱ the comment is made by the Inquisitor in *Birthday of the Infanta*, whom Wilde imagines to be impressed with the puppet theatre

^{iv} Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking Glass*, who performs an imaginative text analysis for *Jabberwocky*

^v "In my opinion, narcissism is the libidinal complement of egoism. When one speaks of egoism one is thinking only of the interests of the person concerned, narcissism relates also to the satisfaction of his libidinal needs. It is possible to follow the two separately for a considerable distance as far as practical motives are concerned (Freud, p 617)

^{vi} “You talk in *Dorian Gray* about one man adoring another. Did you ever adore a man?

No, I’ve never adored anyone but myself”(excerpt from the cross-examination of Wilde by Carson, quoted by Sheridan Morley in *Oscar Wilde*, p. 113)

^{vii} Lord Henry’s comment on Dorian Gray, reiterated by Wilde in *De Profundis* to refer to his relationship to Douglas

^{viii} For instance Otto Rank in his 1932 psychoanalytical study *The Double* and Gilles Nérét whose *Erotique de l’art* includes the chapter *Narcisse ou le nu en tant qu’autoportrait*. From the point of view of psychoanalytical history, the concept of the artist as inherently narcissistic can be traced back to Freud, as Berman shows in the study previously quoted

^{ix} The teenager is defined by David Elkind as an “impatient idealist...for ever playing to imaginary audiences “and endowed with “ a sense of immortality and personal fable”-quote from R. Gross, *Psychology*, 1987

^x *Oscar Wilde* ,Sheridan Morley, p 31

^{xi} Ch. Baudelaire, quoted by Lemaire in *Le Dandysme*, p 130:”Le dandysme est le dernier éclat d’héroïsme dans les décadences. Le dandysme est un soleil couchant- comme l’astre qui décline ,il est superbe, sans chaleur et plein de mélancolie”

^{xii} For instance Otto Rank in his 1932 psychoanalytical study *The Double* and Gilles Nérét whose *Erotique de l’art* includes the chapter *Narcisse ou le nu en tant qu’autoportrait*. From the point of view of psychoanalytical history, the concept of the artist as inherently narcissistic can be traced back to Freud, as Berman shows in the study previously quoted

^{xiii} Berman uses the terms readerly and writerly narcissism whereas Freud refers to the shared egotism of reader and writer

^{xiv} this is an attribute of the ideal reader, as imagined by Wilde in *The Critic As Artist* p1144

^{xv} *Mr Oscar Wilde on Mr Oscar Wilde*, republished in *More Letters of Oscar Wilde*

^{xvi} *Selected Letters*,the letter to Ross, 1 April 1897

^{xvii} the concept is discussed in the studies of Marcia, quoted by Gross ,which describe adolescence as a crisis ,moving from the identity diffusion stage either to identity foreclosure(=adopting a conventional role) or though an intermediary identity moratorium(=testing variants, possible roles) into successful adulthood, labelled as identity achievement

^{xviii} p 120,Lemaire-quotes Théophile. Gautier: “La grande poésie est bête, elle croît, et c’est ce qui fait sa gloire et sa force”

The Saint in Front of His Mirror

“Avant tout, être un grand homme et un saint, pour soi-même. Le Dandy doit aspirer à être sublime sans interruption; il doit vivre et dormir devant son miroir”

(Charles Baudelaire, *Mon coeur mis à nu*)

In his novel “The Last Will and Testament of Oscar Wilde”, Peter Ackroyd describes the period of the artist’s success as being “caught in a house of full mirrors”.

The dandy treats or wishes to treat all objects as mirrors ,each revealing to him a new and slightly different version of his beauty ,multiplying his personality in an infinity of reflections.

Yet we have to remember that what is seen in these mirrors is only the mask, as the supreme dandy embodied by Herod tells his adoptive daughter: ”Neither at things nor at people should one look. Only in mirrors should one look for mirrors show us but masks”(p 601)

In the first chapter we have seen how the reader is necessary to provide to the writer that simple faith in the image which he has lost in the fashioning of it, as Wilde explains in *The Critic As Artist*: ”The true tragedy that dogs the steps of most artists is that they realise their ideal too absolutely .For when the ideal is realised ,it is robbed of its wonder and mystery and becomes simply a new starting point for an ideal that is other than itself”(p 1128) .The emotion which is at the origin of creation is regained through the admiration of the spectator, to whom these images are both vivid and vital. This parallels the dandy’s need for a spectator who, in being awed by the dandy’s artificial beauty ,completes the artistic illusion just as the public completes it for the artist.

Yet the mirrors play a much more important role-not only in reflecting and completing the illusion, but in assisting its creation. If Venus is born from the sea and Narcissus’s self-awareness springs from the image in the river, the dandy creates himself as an art object, as an androgynous, supremely sterile form in the mirror.

It is therefore hardly surprising that in *The Fisherman and His Soul* the highest and only god is revealed to be a mirror. And this is not the mirror of art, which consoles us

with an infinity of reflections, nor is it the mirror of love decorated by little Cupids, as the one that Dorian Gray had received from Lord Henry, but the Mirror of Wisdom which reflects everything that exists in the world, except for one's own image.

As Wilde explains in the *Critic as Artist*, it is criticism that leads to new forms, since the creative instinct tends towards repetition. In the case of the dandy, it is lucid self-examination and the awareness of the irrelevance of one's personality that leads to his re-creation as a beautiful object.

The French critics and writers had of course already observed the similarities between the saint and this modern sinner. Underneath the dandy's apparent flamboyance and self-possession they had guessed the monk's repulsion towards his physical nature, the monk's humility. The dandy, unlike the vast majority of egotistic mortals, knows that "no one is worthy of being loved", as Wilde will write in *De Profundis*, where he completes this idea by referring to the love of God towards man as eternal love lavished upon the eternally unworthy. He never has the audacity to expect to interest society or even the humblest of its members by revealing himself and his human weakness. It is only by his mask that he expects to seduce them, it is only by the art of lying that he wants to win their hearts. The nightingale is made beautiful by her singing and the dandy by his disguises. He gives all to an image and knows it is but an image. With a keen sense of beauty and a keener sense of his imperfections the dandy tries to create his perfect mask with the help of a mirror.

Yet unfortunately the use of this instrument associates him in the less subtle minds with the women that had been traditionally portrayed by painters in front of their mirrors and seeming to invite the spectator's gaze. This is what the public usually understands by narcissism—the indulging in one's image, which is of course seen as the special inclination of women—the traditional objects of male subjects, as Simone de Beauvoir notices with anger in her chapter on the narcissistic woman of the 1949 study *Le deuxième sexe* and as Freud had noticed with pleasure in his first paper *On Narcissism*, published in 1914.

We cannot resist the temptation of quoting a few sentences from his essay which show how the myth of Narcissus, despite featuring a man, has been covered by a psycho-analytical myth of the inferiority of women. The reasons for this will be explained shortly and we shall begin by reminding the reader that several versions of the myth existed already in Antiquity, one which substituted the self-image for that of his long-

lost twin sister, another that presented Narcissus' death purely as the punishment of the gods for his cruelty to a male suitor.

It becomes then clear that this romance is unacceptable-not because of the narcissism involved and not because of the implied homosexuality which ,as illustrated by the second variant of the myth, is not a universal taboo. What is indeed unacceptable is male narcissism and this for a very simple reason, which we can explain in Wilde' s words: "Society, which is the beginning and basis of morals, exists simply for the concentration of human energy ...often forgives the criminal ..never forgives the dreamer"(p 1136)

Male narcissism is not permitted because it is man who leads society and such selfless and aimless love in the man would cause the disappearance of organised society, the "long and lovely suicide" of mankind.

All the attractions of narcissism, to which man never remains indifferent ,are therefore projected onto women. Women are said to be the fair sex and therefore justifiably narcissistic and this reassuring, popular superstition inspires Freud in the description of the " purest and truest feminine type": "strictly speaking, such women only love themselves with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them...the importance of this type of women in the erotic life of mankind must be recognised as very great. Such women have a great fascination for men ,not only for aesthetic reasons, *since as a rule they are most beautiful*, but also because of certain **psychological constellations**"ⁱ

This somewhat abstruse term will be explained in the next sentence in which Freud admits that the charm of these women is that of the narcissism which men had to renounce. That men had to renounce narcissism is already clear in the first paper in which the term appears ,Ellis' 1898 paper on *Auto-Erotism*, where he states, somewhat tentatively, it is true ,that the "Narcissus-like tendency is found more frequently in women than men and when found in men, mainly in those who are feminine-minded."ⁱⁱ

In other words, if men insist on spending time in front of the mirror, society has to ostracise them so as to maintain its healthy egotism and ,having determined that the myth of Narcissus is in fact about women, will now rule that all men presenting narcissistic symptoms are effeminate.

All of this is quite hard on the dandies who in fact disliked woman even more than the average Philistine. Since however they shared a mirror and the love of appearances a

,the public will take advantage of this to confuse the two and ridicule the ^{former?}latter -in vain will Baudelaire rage against the “abominably natural” woman who is the opposite of the dandyⁱⁱⁱ, in vain will the French critic Lemaire writing a hundred years later try to differentiate between the static ,self-indulgent narcissism of the woman and the creativity of the dandy.

To the mind of most people Baudelaire will be one with his cat and Wilde will retain the languid manner of his Sphinx. Shall we make yet another attempt to establish the difference? As Wilde would say, it is only the useless that is worth attempting and so by all means let us show that the dandy is not effeminate, but as Baudelaire claims, a saint and a hero armed with a mirror.

Standing in front of her mirror, the woman decks herself with silk and jewellery, as Christina Rossetti writes in her lovely *L.E.L* poem ,the woman makes herself into a “beautiful snare” -she is preparing to meet the man, her dress is a form of celebration and part of the mating ritual. It is for him that she makes her ^{silk} beautiful ,as Simone de Beauvoir marks with bitterness, it is to reveal and tempt nature that she uses art.

On the contrary, the dandy is not overjoyed to see his face in the mirror and as Lemaire observes, his elaborate clothes are meant to conceal the physical self. If he borrows something of the woman’s art and poses, his purpose is not simply to make himself noticed and enhance his natural charm, but on the contrary, to isolate himself. He is creating a stage-costume that will set him apart and he is rehearsing his lines in front of his mirror.

What the woman performs is a sequence of millenia-old rituals of love, whereas the dandy is an artist and a magician that creates his image out of nothing.

“All good hats are made out nothing” says Gladys to Lord Henry, who adds wittily “like all good reputations.”(*The Picture of Dorian Gray* p.224,)

The elements that compose the exquisite and infinitely seductive image of the dandy remind one again of the magician’s limited repertoire of trivial objects. This reinforces the suggestion of the extreme frailty of the illusion he seeks to create and also the vanity of all human actions -as Lemaire remarks, the dandy is a subtle philosopher who, in occupying himself with the creation of trifles, emphasises the relativity of all things.

First of all ,the dandy will be the visible symbol of his age and his dominance will be exerted in the realm of fashion. This is of course the most apparent aspect of dandysm

and before dismissing it as shallow, we might remember that no lesser a philosopher than Emerson had reached the conclusion that :”The sense of being well-dressed affords an inner tranquillity which religion is powerless to bestow.”, an opinion which Wilde shares with all of his characters. Like himself they are usually overdressed(for which they atone by being overeducated),and ,depressed by the dreariness of the modern costume, change clothes at least five times a day.

The war between the dull and the brilliant is first fought in the field of fashion and the dandy tries to subvert the strict codes by making the most of the few accessories that he is allowed to wear. Wilde’ s favourite object to be made into an aesthetic symbol is probably the buttonhole which he defines as “the only link between Art and Nature “(p 1244) and which is used by the dandies as a subtle indication of their mood and romantic whims. “Medieval art is charming ,but medieval emotions are out of date”,(P 91),as Lord Henry remarks and if dandysm is the attempt to assert “the absolute modernity of beauty “(p 1242) in the midst of an unimaginative society, the dandy is the parody of the knight in full armour only wearing some token of his queen. Thus , the lord previously mentioned confesses to have worn violets a whole season for a love that “wouldn’t die”, Algernon wishes Cecily to give him a pink rose that is “just like her” so as to stir his appetite(!)(p.380).while Lord Goring is seen pondering about a buttonhole that is not “trivial “enough and makes him look a “little too old” to propose to Mabel(p 554)

But neither the science in the tying of the tie, that Lord Illingworth tries to teach his illegitimate son Gerald, nor the sentiment and originality of the buttonhole, are enough to create the image of the dandy-there is something missing and that is the cigar.

Opium-tainted as those of Lord Henry or gold-tipped as those of Lord Alfred, the cigar creates a god-like aura around the dandy and has the precious volatility that suits him best. All of the dandies smoke and yet the cigar is never simply mentioned as part of the stage effects, but always re-created with a new symbolic significance.

In *the Critic As Artist* it is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure as it leaves one unsatisfied ,and also an opportunity for social critique when Gilbert remarks that the only use of the British cultural attaches is to provide cigars to their friends. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, smoking is approved by Lady Bracknell as the proper occupation of a gentleman and it is a cigarette case that reveals the identity of Jack and Ernest and provides Algy with an opportunity for romance.

The Picture of Dorian Gray opens with the image of Lord Henry on the divan “smoking as was his custom innumerable cigarettes” and this scene is connected to my mind with that portrayal of the most terrible monster which in Baudelaire’s poems reigns supreme in the menagerie of vice, tempting one to the most unforgivable sins: “C’est l’Ennui! L’œil chargé d’un pleur involontaire,/ Il rêve d’échafauds en fumant son houka...”.

The cigar conveys the suggestion of the volatile and whimsical aspect of the imaginary worlds created by the dandy as artist. He works with the mist that “makes things wonderful”, with mirrors that show us masks and increase beauty by virtue of sheer distance—a comparison that occurs in several of Wilde’s poems to describe extraordinary beauty is “like the shadow of the rose in a mirror of silver”

Another important point about the dandy is that while he lives extravagantly, he makes a point of being in debt. This can be explained as the dandy’s reluctance to be part of the society he both mocks and amuses and it also suggests his dependence on the public.

He knows that his tricks depend on his cunning, but also on the benevolence of his audience. How is he to make himself the centre of attention, to dismiss their hierarchy of values and replace it by his own?

The most powerful magic is that of words and it is fundamentally by conversation that the dandy dominates society just as it was by conversation that Wilde first created his extraordinary reputation.

It is through metaphors that the world is magically re-created, more seductive than ever, as for instance in this apparition of an orchid “beautiful as the seven deadly sins”. and it is through the magic of language that the critic as artist appears for a moment to hold the world in his hand “as a crystal ball”(p.1121)

Therefore the dandy needs “a little help from others” to fashion his perfect image and is for this reason always accompanied by an even more impassible butler, such as Dorian’s Victor, whom he doesn’t trust, or Lord Goring’s “Ideal Butler... a mask with a manner”(p 553)

The valet provides the mirror against which the dandy checks his most subtle and powerful disguise: that of language. For just as he refuses to be seen without the mask that makes his eyes look lovelier, the dandy makes a point of never talking seriously or

as the more genial lord Goring allows, of only talking seriously “on the first Tuesday in every month, from four to seven”(p 555)

If the secret of the dandy's goods looks is to never “show an emotion that is unbecoming”, the secret of his brilliant conversation is that he never listens-except occasionally to himself .

If his clothes are tried on in front of a mirror lit by candles with “very becoming shades”(p 558), his jewelled words are first tried on in front of his butler and this explains the opening of Wilde' s “heartless farce” and the beginning of the third act of *An Ideal Husband* in which we see lord Goring as an actor repeating his lines in front of the mirror that is his Sphinx-like butler :

‘Lord Goring: You see, Phipps, Fashion is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.

Phipps: Yes, my lord.

Lord Goring: Just as vulgarity is simply the conduct of other people.

Phipps: Yes, my lord.

Lord Goring(putting in new buttonhole):And falsehood the truths of other people.

Phipps: Yes, my lord.

Lord Goring: Other people are quite dreadful. The only possible society is oneself.

Phipps: Yes, my lord.

Lord Goring: To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.

Phipps: Yes, my lord”(p. 554)

But while this dialogue perfectly illustrates the philosophy of the dandy, who having somehow managed in most cases to lose both his parents-and thereby his links with nature-is nevertheless bound to his valet who helps him create his image(this is even more clear in the case of women, such as Gladys, who doesn't dare give notice to her maid because she makes her hats), it does not do justice to the butler, who is no mere automaton, but the perfect interlocutor of the dandy, only interrupting when the time is right.

Finally, the butler could be said to represent the dandy's shadowy double ,a warning as to the brevity and extreme frailty of the dandy's success. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* for instance, Lane is shown to be as cynical as Algy and such a dialogue as the one in which the master takes leave of the servant for the week-end seems to anticipate the feeling of emptiness of TS Eliot' s *Wasteland* with that obsessive “what

shall we do.. what shall we ever do?”, the lightness of tone being only the decent mask of extreme boredom:

“Algernon: A glass of sherry, Lane

Lane: Yes, sir.

Algernon: Tomorrow, Lane, I’m going Bunburying.

Lane: Yes, sir(handing sherry)

Algernon: I hope tomorrow will be a fine day, Lane.

Lane: It never is, sir

Algernon :Lane, you’re a perfect pessimist.

Lane: I do my best to give satisfaction, sir.”(p. 374)

Would it be too much to assume that the butler is the secret self of the dandy with whom he shares the love of forms and canons and the pessimism which the latter does not allow himself to express in society? If no one is ever worthy of being loved and if the mask is more interesting than the self, if nobody ever talks anything but nonsense(p. 374), the dandy’s only duty is to be as artificial as possible and the valuable lesson learnt from the artist is that “if you want to give pleasure to others, you had better keep yourself dry”.(*The Remarkable Rocket* ,p. 297)

Having dominated himself, mastered his own emotions and turned his speech into an elaborate delusion, the dandy is now ready to dominate society and to “cause a sensation”. The multiplicity of people is for him the possibility of infinite reflections, all of which add something to his image .Or at least this is his intention and to see how well he manages to make the world into a mirror of his love we shall pass to the next chapter...

ⁱ Major Works, p 405

ⁱⁱ quoted by Berman in *Narcissism and the Novel*

ⁱⁱⁱ quoted by Lemaire in *Le Dandysme*, p. 42:”La femme est naturelle, c’est à dire abominable .Aussi est-elle toujours vulgaire, c’est à dire le contraire du dandy”

A Romance of Art

Having made himself perfect "by the worship of beauty" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 147), the dandy is now ready to experience love or rather to be seduced by his own image as seen through the eyes of his beloved, a wish sometimes clearly expressed, as in Guido's passionate whispering to Bianca, the beautiful wife of a boisterous merchant:

"Ah! Loose the falling midnight of your hair,
And in those stars, your eyes, let me behold,
Mine image as in mirrors. Dear Bianca,
Though it be but a shadow, keep me there,
Nor gaze at anything that does not hold
Some symbol of my semblance." (p. 729)

And what of that? will the reader exclaim, growing slightly impatient. Had not Plato written long ago about the lover's wish to be reflected in the eye of the beloved and had not the eye as a minuscule and yet "perfect" mirror figured among the marvels of Pliny's *Natural History*? The fascination is shared by poets and painters and is perhaps found in those Dutch paintings that include a spherical mirror reflecting the image of the painter, as Flahault believes, observing also that the Greek word for pupil is *kore*, *maiden* and that in Arab the same word designates the eye and the source of water. Etymology is suggestive of the power attributed to the eye of the other, which is in fact the life source, as Sartre explains: "The Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it *is*, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret-the secret of what I am."ⁱ

Having reached this point, it will be easy to explain the difference between the mirroring that occurs in ordinary object love and the mirroring in narcissistic love. In Sartre's version which seems to explain in a fairly satisfactory manner the experience of ordinary human beings, the lover is torn between the wish to exist as an object and the fear of being possessed by the Other. The dread of being dominated by another prevails with the dandy and so he agrees with Herod: "Only in mirrors should one look, for mirrors show us but masks" (p. 601)

By fashioning an infinitely seductive mask that allows him to expose himself without ever revealing himself, the dandy not only overcomes the terror of being dominated by another, which had made Basil run away from a party, in the attempt to avoid the meeting with the comely and still perfectly innocent Dorian Gray, but contrives to reverse the process and to possess the Other, on being looked at.

Thus, the saint is converted into a sinner by a single look at Myrrhina, the charmingly artificial woman learned in the shallow art of cosmetics that Baudelaire had so extravagantly praised, and Salome begs the prophet for a look, being certain it would suffice to make him fall in love with her.

The irresistible attraction is again to be explained in mythical terms -there's something of the Gorgon underneath this beauty and glamour, which is that of a mask, of a dead thing. Of all the dandies in Wilde's fiction, only Lady Bracknell is called "a Gorgon" (p 37), but there are many hints of the funeral mask in the description of Dorian-first of all, there's Basil's otherwise unexplainable terror on seeing him, secondly, we have Dorian's description of himself as the spectator of a play and "Like the painting of a sorrow, /A face without a heart" (p. 244) and thirdly we have to consider that he brings death upon his lovers. Sybil sees him in a frenzy of passion and Basil is allowed to glimpse into the depth of his soul and both have to pay for this revelation with their lives.

Yet we have to state already at this point that Dorian is an imperfect narcissist, for reasons that will be fully explained in the fourth chapter. Cruelty is in Wilde's terms a lack of imagination, whereas love is defined sometimes as "fed by the imagination" and sometimes as "a form of the imagination". (p 999, 1036)

The mask of the dandy may sometimes hide a hideous truth, as in the case of Dorian, but in most cases it conceals trivial emotions and feelings of self-pity, while sometimes it hides nothing at all, as in the etching *The Sphinx Without A Secret* in which a woman takes lodgings to which she goes surreptitiously only to taste the subtle possibility of scandal.

What fascinates the narcissist is the mask, whose glamour is enhanced by the look of the Other, no longer that of the creator, on whom one's identity depends, but that of the admiring spectator.

This is especially obvious in the case of the female dandies, for whom love is the only stage they'll ever play on.

Thus, the ladies in *A Woman of No Importance* amuse themselves with imagining the Ideal Man, who is in fact an ideal spectator: "he should talk to us as if we were goddesses...if we ask him a question about anything, he should give us an answer all about ourselves" (p.481) and even such a sweet young lady as Mabel Chiltern will complain about her suitor's incessant proposals, remarking that "If he proposed at the top of his voice, I should not mind so much. That might produce some effect on the public".(p 545)

As a matter of fact, "A woman will flirt with anybody in the world as long as there are other people looking on"(*The Picture of Dorian Gray*,p. 232) and it might be concluded from these examples that Wilde contributes to the French model of the dandy his equally sceptical and imaginative counterpart under the various masks of Mrs Cheverley, Mrs Erlynne, Gwendolen, Cecily, Mabel.

For the narcissist, the mirroring is not only a stage or part of love-it is its very essence, its perfect metaphor.

If ordinary lovers seek solitude and find the presence of spectators disturbing, the narcissist-who only plays the part of a lover, on account of its aesthetic potential-will express the same wish as Gwendolen at the very beginning of her engagement with Jack: "what wonderfully blue eyes you have, Ernest! They are quite, quite blue. I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present".(p.367)

These examples have hopefully persuaded the reader of the fundamental difference between the narcissist and the ordinary lover both in the type of mirroring fulfilled through love and in the relevance attached to it. Wilde's only symbolist play will be discussed at the end of this chapter as the perfect illustration of the mirroring fascination.

Another question must be addressed at present, namely the choice of an ideal mirror. It might as well be observed that the love-object is not more important to the narcissist who is interested only in fashioning his image than the raw material is to the artist. What fascinates him most is the ingenuity of his own disguises and love-adventures, for which the beloved provides a pretext. What interests the dandy is precisely this theatrical illusion and the multiplication of his ideal image in mirrors. A lover gives him an opportunity to invent himself, an audience for which to perform, or as Lord Henry

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explains the charm of matrimony: "it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties." (p. 9)

Of course, something of this glamour will be lent to one's partner, usually by paying the least possible attention to their true image and by shrouding them in costly metaphors and luxurious epithets. This is narcissism at its happiest and most charming, as revealed in many of Wilde's letters to his friends and lovers, and in his conversation as filled with extravagant compliments as that of his dandies on stage. It is the "philosophical" attitude of the lizards in the Infanta's garden, who take delight in the misshapen dwarf and contend that: "Everyone cannot be as beautiful as a lizard. It would be too much to expect. And, though it sounds absurd to say so, he is really not so ugly after all, provided of course that one shuts one's eyes, and does not look at him" (p 230)

Despite this imaginative generosity which enables the narcissist to be "happy with any woman provided he doesn't love her" -in other words, provided he doesn't look at her, the narcissist is of course happiest when creating his impressions on the best material. And this raises the interesting question we have asked before and hesitated to answer for it is not easy to conceive of human beings as a raw material or to determine the qualities that would best suit the purposes of a narcissistic artist..

Let us however, suppose for an instant that "men use their fellow-men as mirrors", as not only Wilde, but the T'ang Chronicles asserted. If such a thing were possible or acceptable, what kind of mirror would be the ideal?

To answer the question, we might begin by discovering what it is that the ordinary mirror lacks and why it fails to mediate the romance between self and ideal self, as Bachelard remarks.

In the opinion of the author of *L'eau et les rêves*, the mirror prevents dreaming because of its definite object status, because the image in the mirror is both too stable and inaccessible, as compared to the less clearly-defined and less clearly-separated image in the river.

It is in a poem by Sylvia Plath that this distressing impartiality of the mirror is vividly expressed: "I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions/Whatever I see I swallow immediately/Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike./I am not cruel, only truthful-/The eye of a little god, four-cornered":...

The poem cunningly invents the personality of a supremely impersonal item, suggesting a kind of imaginary self-portrait of the object that, in reflecting all images, is itself void of an image.

The mirror lacks an image of its own and it lacks empathy, qualities that the ideal mirror represented by the lover ought to possess.

The ideal lover will therefore be equally narcissistic, as revealed in the poem in prose *The Disciple* in which the pool ignores the beauty of Narcissus and loves him because his eyes brought to it the reflection of its own beauty. The suitable partner for Narcissus is not Echo, but an equally self-absorbed, imaginative and youthful apparition. In fact, a partner that resembles himself as much as possible and is therefore capable of empathy and insightⁱⁱ.

The egotism, the imaginative impulse and the charm of youth are indeed to be found in the lovers imagined by Wilde, yet there is a certain variation of the character, depending on the element that prevails. Their personalities are volatile and have the whimsical elegance of perfumes-and as in perfumes, they possess a key-note which is either egotism or art and youth. The first case engenders the society ladies and dandies, while the second produces actors and actresses. As for the Salomé, she represents a unique creation whose composition shall not be discussed at present

Let us consider first the society ladies, who represent the counterpart of the male dandy. Wilde in fact calls them dandies and is far more generous to them than the French decadent writers. If he has not invented the type, he has certainly lent it an extraordinary glamour. Judging by the accounts of his contemporaries and by his own meek correspondence with women, it is very unlikely that London should have been filled with women as superbly uninhibited and witty as his beloved Gwendolen, Cecily, Mabel, but then again Victorian London was not exactly a hothouse filled with dandies, either, as it would appear from Wilde's plays.

Still, the male dandy was an established type, and Wilde could derive inspiration not only from what in France was already a decadent tradition, but also from native sources ranging from the glory of Disraeli to the disgrace of Wainwright, while for the female counterpart of the dandy he had few, if any precedents. But the first condition for being allowed to enter Paradise is being able to imagine it, and so the narcissistic lover will create his Eve.

In *A Woman of No Importance*, the ideal couple is sketched as Mrs Allonby, the author of the previously quoted speech on the ideal man and Lord Illingworth, who is less than perfect by ordinary standards and who does not hesitate to suggest a new kind of Paradise to his appreciative companion:

“But, if you wish, let us stay here. Yes, let us stay here. The Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden.

It ends with Revelations.

You fence divinely. But the button has come off your foil.

I have still the mask

It makes your eyes lovelier.

Thank you. Come”(477)

The brief repartees that make words flash as steel-blades are part of the new perfection, both beautiful and poisonous, that the dandy imagines. The unlikely aspect of these romances, which rather invent than describe an existing feminine type, is stressed by the garden imagery which to my mind gives a hint of Utopia.

The reader remembers of course, that Cecily has a first glimpse of Algernon in her garden and that Chasuble and Miss Prism rely on gardening analogies in their more tentative courtship, while Mabel and Lord Goring first taste of happiness in the hothouse-under the palm-tree .

In the last example, we are presented with a favourite decadent setting ,while the naturally beautiful garden can be interpreted as a lingering childhood nostalgia of “simple pleasures” (p. 477)or ,as I prefer to interpret it, as suggestive rather of a still inaccessible paradise. As Wilde remarks, the only difference between the saint and the sinner is that the former has a past and the latter has a future and it is possible that the playwright created the New Woman and hoped that Life would have the wisdom to imitate Art ,according to the principles detailed in *The Decay of Lying*.

This romance he imagines then is that between two equally self-possessed, illusion-free individuals, confronting each other in full armour and wearing their masks.

The image of the duel pleases Wilde who uses it almost in the same terms in his novel, as a conversation between Lord Henry and Gladys(p 234)

Such repetitions are possible because these male and female dandies never propose to express themselves and are equally appreciative of the unreality of romance and the necessity for deception.

Thus, Lord Henry's wife, that decorates her rooms with foreigners instead of orchids, surpasses him in the art of lying, while Mabel asks her fiancée not to be serious and Cecily is indignant at Algernon's confession that he is not really wicked: "If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a most inexcusable manner... I hope that you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy"(P378)

What the imaginative and cynical society lady provides for the dandy is the possibility to re-invent himself under new disguises and this accounts for the willingness with which both Jack and Algernon hasten to be re-christened Ernest. The slip that Jack makes: "I must get christened at once-I mean, we must get married at once"(p. 366) is indeed of the Freudian type and points to the new fictitious identity opened to him by marriage, that of a fascinating for ever mysterious man. As suggested by Gwendolen: "for me you have always had an irresistible fascination... There's something in that name that inspires absolute confidence... It is a divine name. It has a music of its own. It produces vibrations..." (p. 366)

By this elaborate romance with her lover's name, Gwendolen avoids the closer examination of her lover and manages to retain something of a beautiful delusion. The absolute remoteness is made clear by her telling Jack: "Even before I met you I was far from indifferent to you. We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines and has now reached the provincial pulpits, I am told; and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest."(p. 365)

Underlying this apparently absurd speech we find the bitter irony of the dandy who knows that "no one is worthy of being loved" and that only the appearance of a mask or a name may be chosen.

The female, as the male dandy, can be happy with any man, provided she re-invents him and this accounts for the haste with which marriage proposals are accepted in what constitutes Wilde's "heartless play", as Shaw has labelled it. I would regard it rather as play in which emotion is sublimated and expressed in artistic terms. The world that is sketched in it is a kind of artistic paradise, reminding one of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which ends with no less than four marriages and uses the forest as a kind of poetic licence for the greater freedom of the charmingly artificial aristocrats portrayed in it.

The setting used by Wilde is the countryside, which is part of the tradition of Victorian farce. The amorality of farce was usually made acceptable by presenting it as the licence of holiday, either at a resort or in a picturesque village ,yet the play usually ended with the resolution of the protagonist to return to the city and abide by its moral laws.

The same is to be observed of Shakespeare's play, in which one marriage is low-key and not meant to last, that of Audrey and Touchstone, but the other two are regarded quite seriously. Rosalind toys with Orlando ,but she confesses to Celia that she is deeply in love with him and despite the theatrical aspect of these romances, the play ends with a grand and-probably credible- ceremony of marriage. It is to be presumed that as in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the woman will cease to be playful the moment she becomes a wife.

What Wilde proposes, however, is to prolong indefinitely the unreality of romance-and therefore his play resembles nothing so much as those paintings by Watteau with men and women as vast and glamorous butterflies in an evanescent landscape.

If Gwendolen had never been met with in reality, she could certainly be glimpsed in the visions of the painter previously mentioned-thus ,the society comedy *An Ideal Husband* opens with the description of "two very pretty women ",defined as "types of exquisite fragility"(p. 515),whom Watteau would have liked to paint.

In the visions of this painter, as in the Persian rugs that Lord Henry admired and in some of the symbolist paintings ,the woman is indeed charmingly artificial and perfectly integrated into the paradise of art.

The female dandy may not have existed in contemporary London or in contemporary fiction, but she does occasionally emerge in such canvases as *La Jeune fille au paon* by E. Aman or the astonishingly flat painting by Matisse of a woman seated at a table in which the fruit-bowl, the wallpaper and the body of the woman are all on the same plane and subordinated to the elaborate design..

In the case of painting ,this of course has to do with a new way of thinking about art, with the wish felt by some innovative artists to spoil the illusion of reality so lovingly constructed by their predecessors. If the women of Titian for instance were so carefully modelled and subtly coloured as to cause the suspicious legends of the painter mixing his own blood and semen into the pigments, the women of some symbolist canvases are purely decorative and an integrated ornament or the central piece of an

ostensibly flat painting.

This clearly appeals to the narcissism of Wilde and appears first in such poems as *La Dame Jaune* or *Fantaisies décoratives*, whose very titles acknowledge the influence of the French symbolist paintings, yet his most successful and least obvious version of the “flat” character which is self-consciously ornamental is probably Cecily, a very young and imaginative girl most often seen in a lovely garden and who surrounds herself with symbols and thrives on imaginary romances.

“Women capitalise on their emotions”, as Lord Henry remarks, yet Wilde has the grace of presuming that women are more interested in romance because it is the only realm in which they are allowed to dominate, the only mirror in which they may be reflected. This is made clear in Lord Goring’s speech to lady Chiltern: “A man’s life is of more value than a woman’s. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. A woman’s life revolves in curves of emotion. It is upon lines of intellect that a man’s life progresses... A woman who can keep a man’s love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them.”(p 579)

This sums up the prejudices of his contemporaries with regard to women, prejudices which were probably not shared by Wilde, as it would appear from the ideal woman sketched in his own plays and from his admiration of American women that are “bright, clever and wonderfully cosmopolitan” and whose chief charm is that of never talking seriously(p 964), which is also the dandy’s chief accomplishment.

Rather than insisting on political reforms that would enlarge the scope of a woman’s life, the writer prefers to fulfil this ideal of a self-aware, self-reliant woman in his fiction and after this hopefully relevant digression, we shall now return to Cecily, an innocent girl living under the supervision of her ostensibly virtuous guardian and of a “female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education”(p412) as Lady Bracknell characterises Miss Prism.

Her only escape is clearly provided by the imagination and if she has to live on her emotions, she consoles herself by choosing the most becoming and entirely artificial ones.

In the first chapter we have spoken of the narcissism of adolescence as preceding object love and of course the reader could quote a wealth of examples about a girl’s first romance, which takes place in the imagination, one of the most beautiful

illustrations that come to my mind being that of M Eliade's *Maitreyi* who is first symbolically wedded to a tree.

The setting in which Cecily lives is equally flowery and secluded-and she also begins by an imaginary romance, but this is a romance of art, entirely self-conscious from the very start. The case is a particularly interesting one, demonstrating the power of the imagination.

Thus, the wicked gentleman is invented by Cecily's tutor as a pretext for his own escapades into town, re-invented by Cecily as her wicked lover and eventually embodied by Algernon who can only glide into the private universe of a girl's dreams by means of a mask.

Yet unlike the dreamy Ophelia or the Madeline in Keats' poem *The Eve of St Agnes*, the society woman imagined by Wilde is fully aware of the unreality of the lover's beautiful mask and does not allow him to forget this for an instant, surprising him not so much by her beauty as by her joyful scepticism.

When talking to what they presume to be natural women, the dandies are sometimes painfully unnatural. This is most obvious in Algernon's incredibly clichéd declaration: "Miss Cardew, ever since half-past twelve this afternoon, when I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have not merely been your abject slave and servant, but ,soaring upon the pinions of a possibly monstrous ambition ,I have dared to love you wildly, passionately ,devotedly, hopelessly."(p. 393)

The clumsiness of the speech is undoubtedly due to the dandy's uneasiness in dealing with women. Yet the girl whom he assumes to be perfectly innocent is a more accomplished narcissist than he is and her reaction surpasses all the expectations of artificiality, for she wishes to copy his remarks into her diary which is "simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions and consequently meant for publication "(p.393)

This places her in the position of a subtle critic ,so that Algernon's high-flown comments are subtly mocked by this uncannily wise young lady and after her ironic hints are ignored, she is forced to tell him quite plainly : "Oh, I don't think that makes any sense at all."(p. 393)

Cecily laying down her pen and looking reproachfully at her stammering lover is a new Beatrice that seeks to instil a different kind of perfection, which is not moral, but purely artistic. What she reproaches Algernon is not the lack of sincerity, but the

inability to create the illusion of truth or the kind of falsehood that “should be true”(p390)

Young, beautiful and extremely imaginative, this exquisite counterpart of the dandy poses serious demands on him and sometimes wearies him. She is too bright and ruthless a mirror and thus the dandy is sometimes unable to indulge society games, whose mechanical character reminds him too vividly of his own artificiality. The image in the mirror can be tantalising as suggested by the ending of *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

“Chasuble(to Miss Prism):Laetitia!(embraces her)

Miss Prism(enthusiastically):Frederick !At last!

Algernon: Cecily!(embraces her)At last!

Jack:Gwendolen!(embraces her)At last!” (p. 418)

which is disturbingly similar to the grotesque movement in the poem *The Harlot's House*: “Sometimes a clockwork puppet pressed/A phantom lover to her breast,/sometimes they seemed to try to sing/sometimes a horrible marionette/came out and smoked its cigarette/Upon the steps like a live thing”.

Reiteration of the marriage pattern seems no longer to convey dignity to the comedy or tragicomedy of love, as it was the case in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, but rather to turn the characters into mere puppets pulled by strings, an image that haunts the minds of decadent writers.

The society woman, however perfect in herself, may not be the ideal mirror after all. The reason for that is to be found in the inner contradiction of the dandy as artist, who cannot desist from the search for new sensations, as Wilde confesses :” I would go to the stake for a new sensation and yet I know there is no such thing as a new sensation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Expressionless and self-possessed himself, the dandy longs for a woman that will reveal and reflect all of his moods. It is the encounter between the Sphinx and the Chimera, as imagined by Flaubert and re-created by Huysmans' protagonist Des Esseintes, who places the statuettes of the Sphinx and Chimera in his room and waits for his ventriloquist lover to give utterance to their lines.

It is the encounter between Dorian and Sybil ,whom he worships because “she is all the great heroines of the world in one”(p. 64) and whom he crushes by his contempt when she no longer stirs his imagination.

What the dandy desires is the perfect illusion and this can perhaps be provided by the professional actress, whose living depends on her ability to act convincingly.

Of the three women that Wilde "would have married with pleasure", two were actresses- Sarah Bernhardt and Lily Langtry^{iv}- and this preference is shared by the decadent writers for several reasons which can be summed up as amorality, artificiality and androgyny.

The actress is not only able to reflect different moods and embody different ideas, she is sometimes capable to give an androgynous suggestion that is very precious to the dandies because of its associations with sterility and god-like completeness.

The most wonderful example is Tintomara, the protagonist of Almqvist's 1834 novel *The Queen's Jewel* which embodies art's freedom and ambiguity that dissolves antinomies by her capacity to become what the spectator desires, an exquisite woman in the eye of men and a man in the eye of women, equally fascinating to both.

Mademoiselle de Maupin, having troubled young Theodore by appearing in a man's disguise, reassures him about his apparently homosexual leanings by finally revealing herself as a woman in the role of Rosalind-the same role in which Sybil most appeals to Dorian in a boy's disguise.

Nor should this preference for "boyish" women be interpreted in purely sexual terms, but rather in terms of gender differences. In *The Portrait of Mr W. H.*, the author argues that the Elizabethan male actors playing the parts of women contributed to the creation of a "new and delightful type of womanhood" (p 330) containing the "passionate purity, quick mobile fancy and healthy freedom from sentimentality" that he attributes to men rather than women, whose role is much more restricted.

Actresses appeal to the dandy because they are not part of the highly civilised, conventional society he belongs to, because just like the dandy they create alternative worlds but unlike the dandy they retain the naïvety of the artist, the kind of vitality that he lacks.

"Tired of thought" (p. 1155) and longing for new sensations, despite his often asserted scepticism, the dandy is forced to descend into the life that he despises to find fresh material for his volatile creations. The dinginess of the theatre in which Dorian finds his genius reminds us of the extreme frailty of the illusions which the dandy seeks to create, that depend on the most insignificant theatrical props, on a more or less cynical butler and on the talent of a few comedians.

Once again we are allowed to glimpse into “the rag-shop of the heart”^v from which the artist or the dandy as artist fashions his marvellous creations. If in Huysman’s novel this is made explicit by the protagonist’s recollection of an acrobat and a ventriloquist as his most fascinating lovers, the circus-like aspect is only suggested by Wilde in this description preceding Sybil’s unsuccessful performance:

“The youths in the gallery had taken off their coats and waistcoats and hung them over the side. They talked to each other across the theatre and shared their oranges with the tawdry girls who sat beside them. Some women were laughing in the pit. Their voices were terribly shrill and discordant. The sound of the popping of corks came from the bar.

What a place to find one’s divinity in! said Lord Henry”.(p. 93)

Yet Dorian’s choice is not only prompted by the dandy’s love of the unusual, which leads Des Esseintes to prefer the more obscure authors and painters to the ones universally acknowledged. What he hopes for is a girl “with a simple unspoilt nature”, in other words his own perfect mirror, an artistic genius whose appreciation of art is not marred by the knowledge of life, by the scepticism of the high society ladies.

“A man should know either everything or nothing” (p 368) but the ideal companion of the dandy who knows everything is after all the “little ivory girl” (p 868) whose purity is needed to give completeness to the artistic illusion.

For even while the dandy realises that every century, insofar as it was artistic, was an artificial century, (p. 1118) he is lured by the image of the “white maiden soul” who for one moment is seen to embody the auroral age of art before the awakening of the critical spirit.

Thus the origin of art is once again found in the myth of the girl tracing her lover’s shadow in the sand. Sometimes this girl is a narcissist, as for instance Almqvist’s Tintomara, or as Whistler’s white girl, portrayed gazing at her image in the mirror. Sometimes as in the case of Sybil, she is a narcissist capable of transferring her love onto an object which is of course idealised -what charms Dorian is precisely Sybil’s childlike aspect, her ability to see him as Prince Charming and when “his soul bowed in worship in front of her white soul”, it was in fact his own perfect image as revealed in Sybil that he bowed to, as apparent even from Basil’s observation: “the gods made Sybil Vane for you. Without her you would have been incomplete”(p. 94)

Yet the moment the actress becomes fascinated, she ceases to fascinate since what the dandy looks for is the Virgin mirror. Not the unkind mirror that shows him the imperfection of his disguises, but the mirror of art- in becoming the lover of an actress, he can recreate himself in an infinity of exquisite images, as for instance in this ecstatic speech of Dorian's: "I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth"(p.88)

From the love of a woman who had, like himself, the decency never to reveal her own emotions, the dandy passes to the even more exquisite love of a woman that does not have any emotions, except those engendered by art. Sybil fascinates Dorian because she is never herself: "Tonight she is Imogen and tomorrow night she will be Juliet. When is she Sybil Vane?

Never"(p.64)

This is even more clear in the case of the boy-actor Will Hughes, whom Wilde invents in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* as Shakespeare's muse and who maintains his youth by experiencing emotion exclusively through art. Expressing the whole range of emotions and revealing to the spectators the secret of their own soul, the actor or actress is to remain completely unemotional and Wilde interprets Sonnet XCIV as referring to the actor's craft and to the ideal lover as one belonging to the race of actors: "Those that have power to hurt and will do none,/That do not do the thing they most do show;/Who moving others, are themselves as stone,/Unmoved, cold and to temptation slow."

What the dandy desires is a woman who can express passion precisely because she has never felt it -a "born artist" who does not possess a life separate from that of the stage. It is "fierce chastity" (*Remorse*) that most appeals to him and yet this chastity is lost the moment the dandy seeks to reflect his image in the beloved. This contradiction is apparent in any love relationship as explained by Sartre in which the subject wishes to perceive himself as object, through the eyes of the other, yet the moment he manages to exist for the other, to fascinate the other, he is again re-instated as subject and left in his loneliness.

This justifies Lord Henry's belief that Dorian would have been "wretched"(p. 114)-that is to say, bored- in marrying Sybil.

The inner contradiction of all love is sometimes projected onto the woman, in keeping with the decadent tradition and generates Lord Henry's misogynist speeches about

women as “charmingly artificial” yet lacking “a sense of art”(p.117) This ,however, is an equally fitting description of the dandy and as Camus will argue, of Wilde himself: ”Personne n’est allé aussi loin que lui dans l’ exaltation de l’ art et personne ,pendant tout ce temps,ne fut moins artiste”^{vi}.

If the society woman had provided him with the reassuring mirror that reflected only masks-his and hers, the actress in whom he had sought to embody his barely acknowledged and never fully renounced artistic inclinations, allows his delusions to crystallise only to reveal his loneliness more completely.

If the romance with the society woman collapses into boredom, the flirtation with the actress ends in complete disenchantment and forces the dandy to become aware both of the existence of his illusions and of their melodramatic or ridiculous aspect.

The suicide of Sybil is given an artistic interpretation by Lord Henry and Dorian accepts it with gratitude-but this is a superimposed image, just as the portrait of Sybil he requires from Basil because he wishes to “have something more of her than the memory of a few kisses and some broken pathetic words.”(p. 128)

Underneath the mask of the actress the dandy reluctantly discovers the female and the drama that had for a moment seemed the “meeting-place of art and life” is after all closer to life and too mimetic an art .As Wilde observes in *The Decay of Lying* ,there are considerable dangers in lending Art the vitality of Life: ”One touch of Nature may make the whole world kin , but two touches of Nature will destroy any work of art.”(p.1078)

The theatre is fascinating as a “meeting place of all the arts”and the stage may be the return of art to life”(p.1162), as Wilde asserts in *The Truth of Masks*, yet on account of its superior mimetic capacity, drama is more likely to be trivialised than the more abstract arts of painting and music and the actress is too much like an ordinary woman after all to be a perfect work of art or a perfect mirror.

Thus the artist fails Dorian as he had failed Des Esseintes. The dandy’s ultimate choice is of an entirely artificial woman, neither an actress nor an elegant cynic, but the woman perfectly controlled and sublimated into an art-object.

The misanthrope that is Des Esseintes has long abandoned the pursuit of women and prefers to live in the company of paintings. This is the prevailing sentiment in decadent circles, as Goncourt explains: ”Nous avons peu a peu remplacé la femme, autrement

dit le pretexte de l'amour, et la nature, par le tableau. Tout ce qui n'est pas traduit par l'art est pour nous comme de la viande crue."^{vii}

The narcissistic male had always been more fascinated with women's bonnets than with the women, so that this attempt to retain nothing of the woman except her beauty is the last logical step in the development. What remains to be established is the particular image in which this ideal crystallises and the critics seem to agree in designating Salomé as the goddess of the Decadence.

In choosing this character, therefore, as the protagonist of a play, Wilde not only follows his own advice from *The Critic As Artist*, namely of finding his source of inspiration in previous art, but also seeks to make himself the centre of the movement by making its symbol recognisably his own.

At the time when Wilde was writing his play, the Salomé had already been detached from her obscure Biblical origins and turned into an artistic symbol. Since it is "women who dominate society" and it is the Salomé who dominates in the decadent circles, to be the master of her image is a confirmation of one's artistic supremacy.

Moreover, the Salomé, while perhaps glimpsed at, as Karl Beckson believes, in Whistler's paintings of the *White Girl* and in certain poems by Symonds and Swinburne, is clearly not confined to the British realm-for she is invented by the French and is from the very beginning a cosmopolitan type.

By writing a French play for a British audience, the artist seeks to dominate the European stage and acquires the distinction of a foreigner, which is the obligatory attribute of artists. Lady Henry cannot account for her fascination with pianists until an apparently slight reason is suggested to her: "Perhaps it is that they are all foreigners, aren't they? Even those that are born in England become foreigners after a time, don't they? It is so clever of them and such a compliment to art"(p 55)

The same view is more convincingly put forward in *The Critic as Artist* where Gilbert sees culture as the only possibility to forge the peace that "springs from understanding"(p 1153) What Wilde has in mind is not the emotional, but the intellectual aspect of art, "the cultivation of the habit of intellectual criticism" that will eventually enable people to free themselves from their emotions and prejudices.

The artist as a foreigner is an example of isolation and remoteness-a simile that recurs in the fiction of Wilde to describe ideal beauty is "like the shadow of the rose in a mirror of silver".

The artistic aspect of a romance depends on the ability to create and maintain distances and this is achieved in the play by choosing the medium of a foreign language and a character already sublimated in fiction.

More importantly, the Salomé that had already starred in ballets and paintings, poses a challenge for Wilde, who seeks to bring her from the realm of ambiguous images into the more intellectual realm of literature.

The glove had been thrown by Huysmans who had stated in *À rebours* his belief that Salomé, on account of her gorgeous irrationality and of the uncertain mixture of debauchery and purity, could only be embodied in painting and had to fail in literature. For Wilde, however, literature was the highest art, capable to bring about the unity of all others in criticism and words were the most plastic of materials.

His Salomé will include all the previous ambiguities of painting and be as self-absorbed as Symons' dancer, she will have something of Flaubert's virginal Hérodiade and even more of those feminine visions that tempt St Anthony, something of the cruelty of Moreau's *Apparition*, but she will bear a closer resemblance to Wilde's society ladies and to the exquisite actress type Sarah Bernhardt for whom the play was written, according to some critics^{viii}.

To make all these different elements combine successfully, the artist as critic has to translate them through the medium of his own personality and this accounts for the fact that Salomé resembles Wilde himself, as a few of the Beardsley drawings reveal. The symbolists had projected Salomé as the mysterious Other, the ambiguity of the image reflecting their ambivalence towards the woman who appeals to them by her charming artificiality and repels them by revealing her lack of art.

The pendulum swing is visualised in Moreau's two most famous versions of Salomé, the oil painting of *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* and the water-colour *L'Apparition*. The former represents, in Moreau's conception an entirely poetical and youthfully narcissistic creature, to quote his own imaginative description: "la femme éternelle, oiseau léger, souvent funeste, traversant la vie une fleur à la main, à la recherche de son idéal vague...l'emblème de cet avenir terrible réservé aux chercheurs de l'idéal sans nom, de sensualité et de curiosité malsaine^{ix}".

The latter, however, is also the quintessence of femininity, now described as "cette femme ennuyée, fantasque, à nature animale...qui cherche les émotions malsaines et qui, stupide, ne comprend même l'horreur des situations les plus affreuses"^x.

It is reasonable to presume, with Marc Debenedetti, that in the image of Salomé the debauched mother and the virgin daughter have been melted into a unique symbol, rendered powerful by its ambiguity.

Wilde retains this mixture of lust and chastity for his Salomé, but he lends her a voice and a personality that are quite similar to his own.

What had been for the dandies the reflection of their fantasies round women is now re-invented by Wilde as the reflection of the dandy himself.

To understand the extent of this revolution-which will lead to the "Salomania" of the 20's -we shall take a look at her artistic counterparts.

The already mentioned Salomé of Moreau is either a "jewel covered in jewels" as Gauguin contemptuously remarks or else a beast that fascinates by her very indifference-the embodiment of the beautiful narcissistic woman according to Freud.

In either case, she is only one -important, and yet subordinated -piece of an elaborate design. Huysmans is more fascinated with the symbolism of the lily she carries in her hand than with the secret of her being

As for Flaubert's Hérodiade, despite giving the title of the story, she is only seen at the very end, a brief and almost uncanny apparition whose demand for Jokanaan's head is delivered in a child-like tone and with an even more infantile lisp.

The description of Salomé is the description of her dance, the one element somewhat minimised by Wilde, as it had already been exploited by Flaubert, and by a host of choreographers. Instead, he invents her a personality and thus creates the possibility for an exquisite romance of art that was ostensibly absent from the previous versions as from the Biblical one.

Nor is he content with exploiting the potential amour between Salomé and Herod, but invents several narcissistic characters simply to intensify romance by repetition and to view his ideal self in a multiplicity of mirrors.

Each mirror adds something to the intense flirtation between the artist and his ideal self, under the various masks of the Young Syrian and the Officer, of Salomé and Jokanaan, of Herod and Herodias. The artist projects himself in all the characters of the play and this unparalleled achievement gives some support to his claim of having transformed the most objective form of art, namely drama into the most subjective.

The attempt to portray oneself without disturbing the harmony of the whole is more difficult in the case of the playwright than of the painter, and if several self-portraits are to be created, the difficulty is manifold.

To allow the recognisable personality of the artist to dominate the stage, one has to spoil the mimetic illusion, something that Wilde is not reluctant to do.

The Salomé that has confused the critics who have been at a loss whether to interpret it as poetical or as satirical, is perhaps an uninhibitedly artificial construction, meant by Wilde as the supreme illustration of creative criticism.

The ecstatic dancer had already been identified as a symbol of the destructive art for art's sake, of the fascination of the visible against the background of an ugly and sensible age.

In Flaubert's tale, as in Wilde's play, the reader is presented with the quarrelling Jews as embodying the Philistine type and with a king that resembles the dandy in his love of refinement.

Yet the possible symbolic relevance of the tale to the author's own time is only implicit in Flaubert's version, which contrives to reconstruct the Biblical setting of the story in the strictest archaeological fashion.

Wilde's innovation is quite remarkable in this respect, too, for he places his Salomé neither in the remote past, as Flaubert, nor in the remote and poeticised Orient, as Moreau, but instead he explicitly connects her to the contemporary decadence and to his own work.

This is probably also done to raise the status of the drama, which during the Victorian period was thought of as a form of entertainment rather than an art form.

If the characters of Wilde talk like himself, this is partly because they cannot help it, but more importantly because he means to lend drama the dignity of his own personality.

In this, he anticipates the evolution of modern art as discussed by Debray, from the work without an author of the medieval period to the contemporary artist without artwork, a radical step not taken by Wilde who nevertheless moves quite far in that direction and realises that his personality can increase the value of his work.

"All my works are dominated by myself", he insists, sometimes begrudging actors their share of genius and finding fault with them for being "a little too fascinating",

sometimes denying all external influence on his work and any possibility of his writing a play for a particular actor.^{xi}

This emphasis, deriving some of its strength from the artist's narcissism, is quite necessary in order to change the status of the drama. As the reader doubtless remembers, during the Victorian epoch most plays were conceived exclusively for performance and not meant for publication, a fact that is deplored by Wilde in his "maxims for the instruction of the over-educated" where he observes: "The only link between Literature and Drama left to us in England is the bill of the play"(p 1242) To change this reality all of the artist's egotism is needed and Wilde uses a variety of methods to improve the standing of the playwright from a "servant of the public"^{xii} to an artist in his own right, as honoured as the poet.

Apart from the method of self-portraits and the unity of conversational style between Wilde and his dandies, not to mention his curtain-speeches, he resorts to other innovative techniques, such as for instance the integrated signature.

Just as it increases the value of a painting, the signature can augment the value of a play-furthermore, an integrated signature shows us the critic as artist, commenting on the value of his art.

The challenge and rewards of this type of self-representation as the staging of one's name are explored by I. Stoichiță^{xiii} who shows how the signature is gradually moved from the frame of the painting to the interior and from a super-imposed element on the finished work of art to an integrated element of the painting, reflecting the artist's gradually intensified wish for self-glorification. or rather the public's growing acceptance of the artist's egotism.

Despite all the fascinating problems raised by the staging of the signature, the case is a simpler one than that of the writer who cannot readily introduce his name in a work of fiction, certainly not in a Biblical story.

Nevertheless, Wilde is determined to place his signature inside his play and this is done by means of a symbol-the "little green flower" (p.588) which Salomé promises to give the Young Syrian and which clearly recalls the green carnation worn by Wilde and his friends at his opening performances.

It will be objected by the reader that the green carnation was not invented by Wilde, and that according to some critics it was in fact the symbol of the Parisian

homosexuals .

Yet the genius of Wilde consists in his ability to take over symbols or ready-made plots and make them entirely his own. The whole play is in fact a meditation on symbols and on the ability to change their meaning.

By mastering language the dandy masters society and re-creates objects in re-creating their images and inventing new meanings. The technique reaches a climax in *Salomé*, which is the most convincing demonstration of the power of artistic narcissism.

One of the aspects of narcissism is grandiosity and this is discussed by Freud in his first essay on the subject where he refers to those characteristics of children and primitive tribes which ,”if they occurred singly, might be put down to megalomania: an over-estimation of the power of wishes and mental processes, the omnipotence of thoughts, a belief in the magical virtue of words, and a method of dealing with the outer world- the art of magic-which appears to be a logical application of these grandiose premises”^{xiv}.

This, however, is an equally fitting description of the artist, as it would appear from Symons’ poem *The Loom of Dreams*: ”I am master of the world and the sea/And all the planets come to me /And the only world is the world of my dreams /And my weaving the only happiness.”

The same idea is concisely expressed by Wilde who in *The Critic as Artist* shows the brilliant talker holding the world in his hand like ”a crystal ball” (p.1121)

and attributes him the same belief that “the world is made by the singer for the dreamer”(p. 1123)

This is to my mind the prevailing sentiment of *Salomé*, in which the artist wanders through the world of his making, forgetful of the public’s expectations and of the need for petty credibility or drawing-room talk. His narcissism ,never fully satisfied in the society plays, the wish for mirroring that is the essence of narcissistic love, are now fulfilled without a second thought.

The play is lit through many different eyes, all of which represent some aspect of the author. The beauty of *Salomé* is reflected in the wistful gaze of the Young Syrian, a youthful version of the narcissist who ,like the Star-Child of his fairy-tale ,is never tired of reflecting his image in the water, but it also haunts the world-weary Herod in whom Lemaire sees the closest approximation to the dandy, torn between his deep need for beauty and his scepticism and “fear of being”. The beauty of Jokanaan, who is,

perhaps, as Flaubert's St Antoine, a symbol of the artist, is mirrored by Salomé and that of the Young Syrian by the Officer who is his friend and makes him presents in decadent style (p. 591)

In this play, the game of love is no longer a game of words, as in the society comedies, but the intersecting of looks.

There is one intense look in Flaubert's *Hérodias*, but the feeling is uncanny, somewhat resembling Redon's *Araignée souriante*. The shock is undoubtedly given by the fact that that one does not expect Salomé to return one's look, to face one, since she is the product of male fantasy.

The convention may be most easily understood if we consider nudes and the scandal caused by such paintings as Monet's *Olympia* or Goya's painting of Maya, which had nothing to do with the presentation of the body, but with the mocking and lucid look of the model that made the spectator feel uncomfortable.

Nudes and small-scale portraits had been in fashion since the Renaissance, usually hidden underneath a wooden panel and meant only for private contemplation.

The typical look of the woman portrayed is a dreamy or entirely self-absorbed one, sometimes inviting the glance of the spectator without openly challenging him, allowing him to indulge without compromising himself.

The falseness of the situation is most easily visualised in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* which presents a female nude next to her fully-dressed admirers, in the respectably dreary modern suits.

Gide had already remarked that if men were more serious than women, it was only the result of their wearing darker clothes. What Gide, Wilde and Manet wish to reveal is the powerful male desire underneath the apparent rationality.

What the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* represents in the field of painting, the Salomé represents in the field of drama—for the daughter of Herodias not only invites the look of the male spectator, she sustains it and challenges it.

She is annoyed by Herod's staring at her and aware of her power over the Young Syrian—and as for the saint, he is troubled by her golden eyelids and his cry: "Back! daughter of Babylon! Come not near the chosen of the lord" resembles Narcissus' rejection of Echo and the dandy's horrified fascination with women.

By giving Salomé that final speech in which she condemns the saint for not looking at her, Wilde gives his play a polemical twist and voices the most serious accusation

against the symbolist and the decadent writers who cannot allow themselves to look at the woman for fear of being caught in her eye.

The male spectator is not allowed to indulge in the contemplation of a beautiful and mysterious female-the moon seems to watch him coldly and revengefully and the eyes of a hundred white peacocks, which Herod promises Salome in exchange for Jokanaan, mock him. The eyes of the saint are "like black holes burnt by torches in a Tyrian tapestry" (p. 589) and this is a darkening world, a world on the verge of decay, only lit by flashes of desire.

Rather than possessing the image, the spectator is possessed by it and the very objects change under his eyes, proving the power of the artist, the power of language and of symbols.

Words can put any meaning into an image, as Wilde demonstrates in this play and for this reason literature is thought to be the higher art.

The beauty of Salomé first emerges in the Young Syrian's speeches and the beauty of Jokanaan is invented and re-invented by Salomé who shows herself to be a real artist. From the height of his artistic paradise, the writer looks down on the Philistines for whom, as for Herodias, "the moon is just the moon" (p. 592) and who are unable to transfigure everything into beauty.

His story includes the beheading scene, which had haunted so many artists-and contributes the more shocking kiss, the suicide of the Syrian and the dance in blood, all incidents of his own devising and meant to multiply the horror of the main event. Still, despite this rather extraordinary shedding of blood, the play does not strike the commentators as tragic or morbid. This is the direct consequence of the artificiality of characters who are deliberately robbed of psychological depth.

Wilde shatters the mimetic illusion and invites the audience to enjoy art as art. He agrees with Aristotle on the cathartic function of drama, but he does not wish to instil horror and pity in the spectator-on the contrary, he invites him to adopt an aesthetic attitude and treat characters as symbols, using his imagination to transfigure everything into beauty. Symbols can destroy the sense of reality, but they can also make bearable the horror of existence, giving it an artistic meaning, as apparent from Herod's destiny.

He is the embodiment of the dandy, but also of the artist obsessed with beauty who turns everything he touches into beauty-just as Wilde writes of himself in *De*

Profundis: "whatever I touched, I made beautiful in a new form of beauty"(p. 1017). This is both his gift and his punishment, closely modelled on the story of Midas ,with whom the author also compares himself in the same letter. The artist, like Herod, cannot help being fascinated by the mystery of the visible world-the true mystery ,according to Wilde -he cannot stop finding symbols everywhere. He is pursued by his fantasies as Midas by the Harpies : "It is my garland that hurts me, my garland of roses. The flowers are like fire. They have burned my forehead (*He tears the wreath from his head and throws it on the table*) Ah! I can breathe now. How red those petals are! They are like stains of blood on cloth. That does not matter. You must not find symbols everywhere .It makes life impossible. It were better to say that stains of blood are as lovely as rose-petals. It were better far to say that."(p 599)

This is nothing but the artist's monologue ,his meditation on the meaning to be given to his symbols. It is because this is an explicit romance of art that there's nothing shocking in the play, despite its apparent violence-and this reminds us of the artificiality of Dorian Gray whose wounds are" like red roses"(p.68).

This may also have been part of the writer's intention, to demonstrate that "the artist is never morbid. The artist can express everything."(p.17)

Just as Baudelaire had done, he may crown skeletons with flowers and imagine romances for the dead.

Nowhere else in Wilde's fiction do we come across a more convincing illustration of love as a form of the imagination: words engender images who engender artistic emotions. One is reminded of that passage in *The Portrait of Mr W H* where Wilde talks about the finer artistic temperaments in whom feelings may be stirred purely by words and of Dorian's fascination with the words of Lord Henry.

And yet so far we have only covered one possible love-choice-the heterosexual one. Other two possibilities are open: the choice of a same gender-partner, which is hinted at, but never fully expressed in his novel and in *The Portrait of Mr W H* ,and the last and foremost romance, what Wilde calls the lifelong romance ,that of falling in love with oneself.

This type of love is practised more or less explicitly by all his favourite characters from Gwendolen who always carries her diary so as to have "something sensational to read on the train"(p.398) to Cecily who invents a whole romance between herself and her wicked uncle, which gives her the opportunity of writing love-letters to herself and of

buying herself nice presents . It is practised by Algy and Jack who delight in their disguises and by Myrrhina and Salomé whose seduction plans enable them to be once again impressed with their own beauty.

This romance usually happens alongside the shallower object-love which is its pretext ,the only exception to this rule being the rather unimaginative Star-Child who was as “one enamoured of his beauty ,and would mock at the weakly and ill-favoured... himself he loved and in the summer, when the winds were still, he would lie by the well in the priest’s orchard and look down at the marvel of his own face , and laugh for the pleasure he had in his fairness.”(p. 263)

This type of narcissism is rejected by Wilde as far too limiting and it is the fatal mistake of Dorian Gray.

Let us state once again that the narcissism that interests Wilde is of a more imaginative kind ,leading to the creation of new beauty-in other words, an artistic narcissism that will be analysed in the next chapter.

ⁱ quoted by Stewart in *Philosophical Perspectives On Sex and Love*,p. 202

ⁱⁱ Berman quotes Hamilton’s interpretation of the myth of Narcissus and Echo as the sadomasochistic pair, representing insight without compassion and empathy without insight respectively

ⁱⁱⁱ Selected Letters, p. 61

^{iv} quoted in Kerry Powell, *Oscar. Wilde And The Theatre of the 1890’s*, p 42

^v the metaphor has been taken from the poem of Wilde’ s compatriot W.B Yeats: *The Circus Animals’ Desertion*

^{vi} *L’artiste en prison*, p. 8

^{vii} quoted by Lemaire in *Le Dandysme*, p. 173

^{viii} most notably K .Powell, who defines the play as “a loaded gun pointed at Sardou and Sarah Bernhardt and Maeterlinck”, p. 53

^{ix} quoted in *Les Symbolistes*, Debenedetti, p. 138

^x *ibid*

^{xi} *Mr. Oscar Wilde on Mr. Oscar Wilde*, in *More Letters of Oscar Wilde*

^{xii} *ibid.*

^{xiii} *Efectul Don Quijote*, p. 163-189

^{xiv} *Major Works*, p.400

A Portrait Of The Artist

“ You knew what my Art was to me, the great primal note, by which I had revealed first myself to myself, then myself to the world; the real passion of my life; the love to which all other loves were as marsh-water to red wine or the glow worm of the marsh to the magic mirror of the moon”

(Oscar Wilde-*De Profundis*)

In the previous chapters we have analysed those aspects of narcissism that are within the grasp of all sufficiently imaginative mortals, namely the sense of personal fable and self-importance that is typical of youth, the lucid creation of one's perfect image in the mirror as practised by the dandy and the completion of this illusion through love as an empathetic mirror.

All of these methods have been described in detail, in order that the reader should feel tempted to try them at home, while remembering that “those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril”(p.17) . Yet this is how far ordinary mortals can follow ,for there is one type of narcissism that cannot be taught and this is of course that of the artist, the only one who can turn art itself into his mirror if he so chooses.

The possibility will fascinate Wilde, who explores it by means of the pictorial analogy ,which had been known at least since the Renaissance as the most obviously narcissistic of arts-as Alberti observes , whenever painting is taken for the metaphor of art, it is the myth of the artist as Narcissus that surfaces.

Nor is he the only Victorian writer to approach this theme for as he had remarked “in an ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow not from life, but from each other.”

The phenomenon is described by Murray Roston. in *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts* as “the growing distrust of Nature “ shared by artists as diverse as Pater, Whistler ,Symons ,Baudelaire and reaching zenith in Huysmans' A rebours.

Just as the Pre-Raphaelites and the Archaistes of Paris find their themes in literature, though usually not in contemporary literature, the writers take refuge in artists' studios ,although they do not seem especially interested in the work of contemporary painters.

Clearly, what they seek is as great a distance from life as possible-this is discussed by Roston with reference to the art of Henry James, in which there is “three-fold

distancing from nature”, given by the contemplative-aesthetic attitude of the main characters, the further criticism provided by the reflector figures and finally by the writer’s own aesthetic evaluation: “In place of events...the criterion now assumed is the intellectual and artistic pleasure of adding a further specimen of human behaviour to one’s collection, a jewelled instance to be stored away for future leisurely contemplation” .

There is of course a certain narcissism underlying this exclusively aesthetic attitude which seeks to turn human beings into jewels and art objects adorning one’s studio. As Roston observes, the numerous accounts of visits to artists’ studios may be regarded as inner vignettes hinting to the artistic process in the novels themselves. Yet if we compare Wilde’s only novel to contemporary creations such as for the instance the tremendously successful *Trilby* by Maurier or to James’ *Portrait Of A Lady*, it is easy to see how in this respect as well his art is a form of exaggeration. The setting of *Trilby* is a studio in Paris and the main characters are, as in Wilde’s novel, all artists and models. Still, the main plot is a melodramatic, typically Victorian love-story combined with a fashionable case of hypnotism. Art provides the exotic setting and little more.

As for *The Portrait Of A Lady*, the reader is clearly encouraged to consider the unfolding artistic process within the novel ,yet the characters preserve a personality apparently distinct from that of the writer, nor is the illusion of psychological depth abandoned.

Wilde’s novel on the other hand is an unapologetic allegory of art, as clearly indicated already in the preface-not only is the concern with credibility and psychological depth completely waived aside, but the writer uses the same self-portraying technique as in *Salomé* and projects himself in all the three male protagonists.

Such artistic narcissism is indeed without parallel in Victorian literature, as far as I have read it-Berman calls this novel “one of the most narcissistic in the language “and it might well be the only poisonous orchid among the fresh and healthy apple-blossoms of the English garden for to my mind there’s nothing comparable to it in English literature and this is in a way acknowledged by Berman since the other six novels he analyses are as he admits, not more narcissistic than the average and it is to be presumed that had he found any other masterpieces on the theme, he would have used them in his book.

It will perhaps be observed by the reader that the narcissistic theme occurs far more frequently in contemporary literature. Yet we should resist the temptation of identifying metafiction as narcissism. The obsession with one's image is not inherently more narcissistic than Rembrandt's self-portraits and indeed the case may be compared to that of psychotic patients whose loss of identity is revealed by the need to see their reflection in mirrors. Self-portrayal is not always self-glorification, but it may equally well indicate uncertainty.

Having sketched the background, we shall now analyse the use that Wilde makes of the pictorial metaphor and of particular paintings.

In order to establish that, we might begin by considering the prejudices of the artist on the subject. As a dandy and a critic, Wilde will insist on the fundamental unity of all art, which addresses the artistic temperament. As a writer, however, he will exhibit the prejudices of his profession, nor is it important to establish whether he truly believed in the superiority of literature since the value of an idea is not given by the presence or absence of faith in the speaker, as Lord Henry observes.

Inspired by the essays of Ruskin and Pater, sharing the impressionists' contempt of nature and the Pre-Raphaelites' love of beauty, the writer lives in the exquisite world of art, surrounded by exquisite images which he will treat as the raw material for his own creation.

The writer's attitude to painting and painters may be described as slightly condescending for while he does not hesitate to explore his narcissism under the guise of the painterly metaphor or to use the extant types in painting for the description of his characters, he seems to regard the painter as the provider of images that will stimulate the writer's imagination rather than an artist entitled to visions of his own. This is most clear in *The Critic as Artist* where he insists that "the poet may be pictorial or not, as he chooses" (p. 1128), but that the painter should always be pictorial. "Modern paintings are too clever, too intellectual, too assertive," he states, in a tone that would have pleased the Philistines of his and our own time, adding an even more outrageous passage where he accuses the impressionists of "always prating to us on their coarse gritting canvases of their unnecessary selves and their unnecessary opinions" (p. 1147).

This, as the vast majority of his assertions, should be robbed of the exaggeration that is the hallmark of his style and placed in its proper context. What probably disturbed

Wilde was the “ obvious “character of these paintings, in which the artists-particularly the impressionists-portrayed not only themselves, but also their box of paints and their brushes. He objected to the realistic treatment of the theme rather than to the theme as such.

In fact, two of his fairy-tales are inspired by paintings which he regards as self-portraits and this is in my mind sufficient evidence that he did not object to genuine painterly narcissism, but only to the realistic or less imaginative self-portrayal.

Let us turn then, to *The Birthday of Infanta*, identified in his dedication to Mrs Grenfellⁱ as “ the little Infanta whom Velazquez also painted “ and to *The Remarkable Rocket* which is inspired by Whistler’s *Nocturnes*, interpreted by Wilde as the artist’s portrait.

It is hardly surprising, in view of the artist’s triumphant individualism we have discussed at length, that the two paintings he chooses to interpret represent two crucial victories of the artist against the Philistines.

The former, Velazquez’ *Las Meninas*, is unprecedented in the history of Spanish painting and seeks to establish a much higher status for the artist while the latter are the demonstration of the artist’s complete freedom in the choice and treatment of his subject.

To take one painting at a time, let us discuss *Las Meninas*, which had been regarded already in the XVII c as “La Teologia della Pittura”ⁱⁱⁱ and which is still a fertile source of inspiration for contemporary artists, such as Picasso, who painted no less than 44 variations of it.

The fascination with this self-reflexive painting was shared by Manet and Whistler and presumably by Wilde himself who seeks to make it relevant for his own art.

What is presented as a story is in fact another example of creative art criticism and we shall proceed to compare the painting to Wilde’ s version of it in order to reveal the necessary degree of resemblance that will support Wilde’ s assertion about the starting-point of his creation.

First of all, his description of the Infanta in a “robe of grey satin, the skirt and the wide puffed sleeves heavily embroidered with silver , and the stiff corset studded with rows of pearls” clearly evokes the image in the painting, to the detail of the beautiful rose in her hair that is like an” aureole of faded gold” standing “stiffly round her pale little face”(p223)

Other elements of the painting are taken over by the writer-the king, which is an apparition in the mirror, is in the story an apparition in the window-the sombre figures in the background of the painting whose role is presumably to make sure that the young visitors behave, as Stoichiță explains, have their counterparts in the stern Inquisitor, Don Pedro and the Camerera, “a thin, hard-featured woman” who reminds the Infanta not to laugh in an undignified manner. Most importantly, the stifling atmosphere of the Spanish court with its elaborate ceremonies and strict etiquette-relevant because of the limits they impose upon the sorrows of kings and also upon the artist’s wish for self expression-is carefully reconstructed.

The story diverges on some points, which connect it with the melancholy of decadence, as for instance the absence of the queen, who is now embalmed and turned into something of an art-object, the sad melancholy king that watches the world from his window reminding one of Baudelaire’s *Spleen*: “Je suis comme le roi d’un pays pluvieux/Riche, mais impuissant, jeune et pourtant très- vieux”, the cynic for whom even cruelty and the grotesque have lost their attraction: “Rien ne peut l’égayer, ni gibier, ni faucon/Ni son peuple mourant en face du balcon/ Du bouffon favori la grotesque ballade /Ne distrait plus le front de ce cruel malade” matches the boredom of the Spanish king from whom only the misshapen Dwarf would have extracted a smile, in the opinion of the Chamberlain(p.234).

But if such departures from the painting can be explained either as the writer’s wish to create his own version of the masterpiece or/ and make it relevant to the decadent tradition-which in any case admired Velazquez-there is one difference that is indeed bewildering-namely the absence of the artist from the painting.

For hadn’t this been the very point? And hadn’t the critics agreed that by portraying himself next to the Infanta the artist wished to emphasise the nobility of his profession and his right to confer immortality upon himself as well as upon his royal subjects?

The role played by the artist was indeed vital-for he created the king’s inalterable and eternal body-the *corpus representatum* as opposed to the *corpus naturale* of ordinary mortals. The successful royal painting was a mystical experience, the transformation of the natural body into an effigy of heavenly material and this justified Velazquez’ claim for immortality and a royal title.

In interpreting the painting from the perspective of the late XIX c, Wilde notices the change in the position of the artist, who is no longer the creator of immortal beauty,

but rather a figure on the verge of civilised society, interesting the public more by the oddities of his life than by the brilliance of his work and most often being regarded as a harmless entertainer, a situation that never failed to enrage Wilde.

The disappearance of the artist from Wilde's version of *Las Meninas* is only apparent, for his image melts into that of the dwarf who had appeared on the right-hand corner of the painting.

It is perhaps time to stop and apologise to the reader for this rather shocking assertion: having argued on so many pages for the idealising narcissism of the artist who reflects himself in a series of gorgeous young men, the present writer has now the inconstancy to suggest that Wilde caricatures the artist under the features of a misshapen dwarf.

This revelation may be made more acceptable by considering Wilde's maxim that "truth in art is that whose contrary is also true."

Furthermore, in the second chapter we have seen the critical self-examination that precedes the creation of the mask, we have seen the dandy as an ordinary human being distinguished by his extraordinary love of beauty. Could we not then say that in *The Birthday of the Infanta* the writer-through some whim that we need not account for-uses one of the most narcissistic paintings to reveal what he usually seeks to conceal, the frailty of the artist underneath his exquisite style? And could we not say as well that while this story does not present the artist under the most flattering colours, it is even more critical of the society which crushes his egotism?

If these explanations seem unsatisfactory, it is to be hoped that the reader may think of better ones-but what he will probably have to accept is the identification of the painter as artist.

First of all, we have to stress the central role played by the artist in the Velazquez painting and also Wilde's fascination with the theme, which would make it impossible to omit him from the story. The artist simply has to be hiding under one of the masks in the story and this is in my opinion that of the dwarf, for a number of reasons that I will now explain.

First of all, the Dwarf performs for an audience and is deluded into thinking that they are interested in his dancing while in fact they are amused by his personal oddities, which closely echoes the accusation voiced by Wilde-among many others-of the public being more interested in artists than in art.

Wandering through the forest, which is a metaphor of the artist's freedom in the world of fiction, he is discovered by the critics- allegorically disguised as noblemen who introduce him into civilised society-a situation that parallels that of Basil who tells Lord Henry that "we poor artists have to show ourselves in society from time to time, just to remind the public that we are not savages"(p. 10).

Most revealing, however, of his artistic temperament is the final scene of the broken heart, a favourite metaphor with Wilde who manages to renew what had become a cliché into a variety of different images. The story of *The Happy Prince*, which is regarded as an alter-ego of the youthful and selfish artist, ends with the apotheosis scene in which the angel brings the dead bird and the prince's leaden heart to God as the two most precious things in the city. The story of *The Fisherman And His Soul*, perhaps the most serene allegory of art and the most charming plea for its amorality ever written by Wilde, ends with the breaking of the heart so encompassed with love as to leave no place for the soul to enter- an image that anticipates the cry in *De Profundis*: "How else but through a broken heart may Lord Christ enter in?"

In his poem on Keats, the public is accused of attempting to "break the crystal of the poet's heart".

What is relevant in all of these cases is the artificial aspect of the heart which is of gold, of lead or crystal and not a merely human heart. As for the Fisherman, while his heart is not explicitly made of finer stuff, it is clear that his renunciation of the world, despite being motivated by love, is indeed an artistic affair as proved both by the choice of a mermaid as his lover and by her minor part in the story-only her beauty is described and she is the pretext that enables him to plunge into the world of dreams, turning his back on worldly ambitions as well on moral concerns .

The image of the Fisherman in his boat is indeed yet another version of the dreamer, of the artist as dreamer and as a Narcissus lost in self-contemplation : "Vermilion-finned and with eyes of bossy gold, the tunnies went by in shoals, but he heeded them not. His spear laid by his side unused and his baskets of plaited osier were empty. With lips parted and eyes dim with wonder , he sat idle in his boat and listened , listening till the sea-mists crept round him and the wandering moon stained his brown limbs with silver"(p 236). .Is that not the perfect image of the artist surrounded by his nascent visions ,following only the call of his muse and animated by the insane worship of beauty, the image of the weaver whose weaving is his only happiness, as created by by

Symons, of the poet who has only his dreams, as the speaker in Yeats' poem, *He Wishes For The Cloths of Heaven*?

Even if the reader hasn't been persuaded, we still have to return to these hearts so finely-tuned, whose strings snap easily. In *The Happy Prince*, it is the awareness of life's frailty and suffering which breaks the artist's heart—in *The Fisherman And His Soul*, it is the intrusion of ethics upon aesthetics that causes the tragic separation between the artist and his muse, while in the poem on Keats as in *Birthday of the Infanta* it is the cruel curiosity of the public, the objective look that brings about the dénouement, in other words reality itself which destroys the ideal image fashioned in the artist's mind.

Perhaps the reader still objects to the identification between the dwarf and the artist.. Nor is it possible to prove anything about a work of art, which thrives on ambiguity and plural meanings. Yet we would like the reader to consider the fascination of a few modern artists with the world of the circus, which corresponds to their disenchantment with middle-class society and eases their identification with acrobats on the tight rope of paradox(*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 47) and "clowns whose hearts are broken"(p. 1040, *De Profundis*)

As Huysmans, Seurat, Toulouse-Lautrec, Wilde is fascinated with the world of the circus, particularly with acrobats and in his *London Models* he gives us a partial explanation: "The acrobat is an artist. The mere fact that he never speaks to his audience shows how well he appreciates the great truth that the aim of art is not to reveal personality but to please."(p. 978)

This great truth is however a cruel one, reducing the artist to the position of a mere entertainer, and recalling the famous lines of Restoration comedy: "The drama's laws, the drama's patrons give/For we, that live to please, /Must please to live"

If modern artists are more sensitive to the drama in the life of clowns and acrobats, it is because they experience themselves something of that humiliation, of being the servants of a howling public anxious to be amused.

Due to his love of exaggeration, Wilde will even insist in the same essay that the circus is often a more proper realm of modern art than the theatre, "an oasis of Hellenism in a world that reads too much to be wise and thinks too much to be beautiful"(p. 978)

Such exaggerations and fanciful castling apart, it is clear that the circus imagery fascinates modern artists who perceive themselves as somehow on the verge of

civilised society and indeed isolated from it, the essence of that feeling being perhaps captured by Picasso's painting of 1905, *The Family of Saltimbanques*, which made such a strong impression on Rainer Maria Rilke, who will dedicate to them his *Duinese Elegy*: "But who are they, tell me, these migrants, more ephemeral than ourselves...coming down from the smooth, well-oiled air, landing on the carpet which has worn thin and ragged from their continuous jumps, this lost carpet of the universe".

The mystery of these circus performers who are seen still in their stage costumes, as if unable to separate from their masks, the desolate landscape in which they are placed—are suggestive of the solitude and also of the humble condition of the modern artist.

And isn't this circus imagery suggested in *Birthday of Infanta* where apart from the grotesque dwarf the audience are also presented with jugglers, Gypsy musicians and a magician?

Would it be then completely unjustified to say that Wilde anticipates in his story the feeling of Picasso's later painting and that by re-interpreting *Las Meninas* he seeks to show how the status of the artist has been considerably lowered since the time of Velazquez? While the function of art was almost magical, the artist was a respected member of society, as important to the welfare of the state as the king's doctor insofar as he insured the well-being of the king's supernatural body, but when art is thought of as mere entertainment, the artist is robbed of his dignity and reduced to the status of an oddity or a circus-performer.

What remains, however, is to suppress his emotion, to hide his broken heart.. Let us not forget that the story centres on the Infanta who is however not to be seen merely as the representative of the public, but rather as an embodiment of Art itself, desiring the artist to sacrifice his emotions on the altar of beauty. The ending of the story with the frowning of the Infanta whose "dainty rose-leaf lips curl "in pretty disdain"to pronounce the predicament: "For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts"(p.235) resembles the cold chastity of Salomé and of Baudelaire's *La Beauté*, the muse that deserves the artist's adoration.

Turning his back on the vulgar public, "those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things"(p. 17), the artist will concentrate himself exclusively on the beauty of his own making .and despise the objectivity of mirrors.

Fundamentally those artists that are punished such as Basil and the Dwarf are punished for the weakness of their imagination ,for not being artistic enough.

In *Birthday of the Infanta*, we are after all presented with the defeat of the artist and lest we should feel too melancholy and bitter, we must turn immediately to *The Remarkable Rocket* which represents indeed the triumph of the artist, whose imagination never fails him in producing ideal self-images to counter-act the objectifying view of the spectator.

This story represents an act of imaginative audacity insofar as it sketches a narrative for a painting that had won in court the right not to possess one. Not content with re-interpreting the Old Masters and sharing in their glory, Wilde seeks to give us his own version of art for art's sake in his treatment of Whistler's *Nocturnes* as the artist's self-portrait.

That this was his meaning is apparent from a flippant remark quoted by Beckson in his book *London in the 1890's* in which he confesses that he drew Whistler's portrait not in Lord Henry, as the latter had assumed , but in the *Remarkable Rocket*.

It may seem whimsical to invent a plot for a painting that almost lacked subject-matter ,yet if Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold :The Falling Rocket*, lacked a story, it certainly possessed a history of its own by the time Wilde wrote his tale and this history is that of the eternal struggle between the artist and the Philistines, who had for once-ironically enough-found their champion in Ruskin.

First exhibited in 1877, the painting had occasioned the insults of the ageing champion of Turner who, as the reader perhaps remembers, calls Whistler a "coxcomb" who throws paint in the public's eye. These insults will be seized upon by Whistler as a chance to increase publicity for his work by suing the critic and the trial will end with what is unexplainably called by J.E. Mullerⁱⁱⁱ a resounding victory for the painter ,although in fact he receives a farthing damages, which could hardly be interpreted other than as an ironic hint, and finds himself not only slightly humiliated by this equivocal ending, but also ruined ,being forced to leave the country and turn to engravings to restore his financial situation.

All of this is extremely fascinating to Wilde and in his tale he identifies the fireworks in the painting with the artist's own destiny. Whistler, like Wilde, is a dandy ,wishing to "cause a sensation " and to be the centre of attention.

On the other hand, he is also a master of painting, deeply serious about his art as Wilde is about his fiction and forced to hide this seriousness under a flippant manner, jealously guarding his artistic independence and his right to express everything.

Both his greatness and his human weakness are revealed by Wilde in a review written two years before the tale, *Mr. Whistler's Ten O' Clock*, which contains in a nutshell his ambiguous feeling towards the artist and the comparison of his style to fireworks, which will eventually lead to his daring interpretation of the *Nocturne* as a self-portrait. This tale is of course an allegory of art, again detailing the situation of the modern artist and it is indeed "remarkable" by its lightness of tone and the distance it manages to keep not only from the Philistines, but also from the artist.

This can be partially accounted for by the fact that at least in the initial stage the artist in the story is not Wilde, for once, but Whistler, whom he admires and to some extent resembles, but whom he finds easier to mock.

If in *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the artist is presented in accordance with the Romantic convention, as a martyr of an unimaginative society and if in *Birthday of the Infanta* he is the outsider and the clown, in *The Remarkable Rocket* he is an egotist among many, wishing to shock the bourgeois and barely managing to arrest their attention, which is usually riveted upon themselves.

The Remarkable Rocket is anxious to stir a sensation, he begins at the royal court, in the luxury that is the only suitable environment for the artist in an epoch that no longer believes in the social relevance of art. The rich are the only ones who can afford beauty, but they have no need of it and no understanding of it, as it will be made clear from the King's definition of fireworks: "They are like the Aurora Borealis, only much more natural. I prefer them to stars myself, as you always know when they are going to appear, and they are as delightful as my own flute-playing"(p. 295) which- lest we should entertain the slightest hope on the subject, we had already been told that it was very bad indeed.

Still, lovely surroundings are all that the artist requires and his egotism is a match for that of any king- thus the Remarkable Rocket fancies that his being launched merely coincides with the prince's wedding and presents himself as the Prince's friend on account of the fact that he doesn't know him: "I never say I knew him. I dare say that if I knew him I should not be his friend at all"(p. 297), which is a perfect sample of

narcissistic discourse and at the same time an explanation for the possibly harmonious relationship between artist and patron in which they both praise and ignore each other. A more obvious conflict is that between the supremely useless artist and the useful middle-classes, as illustrated in this story by the conversation between the rocket and the duck:

“Quack...quack.. what a curious shape you are .May I ask, were you born like that or is it the result of some accident?

“It is quite evident you have always lived in the country, otherwise you would know who I am...

You will no doubt be surprised to hear that I can fly up into the sky and come down in a shower of golden rain.

I don't think much of that ,said the Duck, as I cannot see what use it is to anyone”.(p.300)

No matter how much benevolence will be exerted on both sides, this dialogue will inevitably end as Wilde imagines here:

“Ah, the higher things of life, how fine they are! And this reminds me how hungry I feel and she swam away down the stream ,saying Quack quack quack”(p. 301)

Still despite being quite alone and ,lacking the support of the rich patron, forced to sink deeper into the mud, the artist is sustained by the “consciousness of the immense inferiority of everyone else”(p. 297) ,in other words by his imagination which enables him to interpret all events and comments in the way most favourable to himself, as illustrated by the two scenes in which he clearly hears the workmen calling him a “bad rocket” and then the two boys calling him an old stick, but re-interprets this as grand and gold respectively. The first of this scenes is worth quoting as a wonderful illustration of the power of the imagination: ”then one of them caught sight of him.

Hallo!he cried. What a bad rocket !and he threw him over the wall into the ditch.

BAD ROCKET?BAD ROCKET? he said, as he whirled through the air, ”impossible! Grand rocket, that is what the man said. **BAD** and **GRAND** sound very much the same ,indeed they often are the same, and he fell into the mud” (p.298)

The capital letters convey the initial shock on being confronted with his image in the eye of the Other, which corresponds to the dwarf's look in the mirror-yet here the danger is overcome and the artist refuses his identification with the Other's image of

him. And this accounts for his final triumph when he comes down in a “shower of golden rain”, not seen by anyone but still successful.

As a kind of final ironic twist, Wilde makes the stick fall on the back of a Goose that exclaims. “Good heavens, it is going to rain sticks”, a comment again interpreted by the rocket in hyperbolic terms: I knew I should create a sensation”, gasped the Rocket and went out.”(p. 301)

This story ,an affectionately ironic exploration of the artist’s situation , shows at once his greatness and his folly, his shallowness and his devotion to the beauty that “abideth for a moment”(p.900)

And it shows us how the artist can be happy in his solitude and even in his humiliation by using his imagination to re-interpret every event and incident of his life.

The unspectacular explosion of the rocket perhaps parallels the obscure ending of Whistler’s trial-yet in choosing this theme, Wilde was appropriating for the uses of his own art and the assertion of his personality what had already become a landmark in modern art.

Having discussed his uninhibited dealing with other men’s creations- a habit that, ironically enough, enraged Whistler among many others, let us now turn to those works in which the writer invents his own paintings to prove a point.

If the tales previously mentioned explored the artist’s relation to his public, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Portrait of Mr W H* explore the artist’s relation to his model or muse.

In the case of Wilde, the muse will be a masculine one, a love-object identified by Freud as inherently more narcissistic^{iv}. This is probably an unfair generalisation ,yet it clearly suits the romances invented by Wilde which again present us with the ideal self-image of a gorgeous young man. Both stories are centred on such portraits, described in exactly similar terms“ a full-length portrait of a young man...of quite extraordinary personal beauty”(p. 392 and p. 6 respectively)

It is on these images -the one a forgery in the conventional Elizabethan style and the other a rather too realistic portrait of a Victorian youth in the costume of his own age- that the story is built- and the reader has every right to be surprised by this for so far it has been argued that artistic narcissism is not static, but the lucid creation of new images and now it seems that the reader is asked to believe the opposite.

The reason for Wilde's use of images is the same as that of all preachers who wish to promote a doctrine or start a movement-as Debray clearly shows in his book, every crusade needs its icons and every army must have its banner. What language separates through analysis, images and symbols bring together .

This need for rituals and images is acknowledged by Wilde even in *De Profundis* where he observes that the agnostics should have a church of their own, with their rituals of scepticism. "It is expression that gives reality to things "(*The Picture*,p. 124) and even though an image can never embrace the whole content of ideas, nor is it desirable in Wilde's opinion that it should attempt it, it may provide the necessary emotional depth and credibility to what was before only a hypothesis.

It is, as Erskine suggests, the glimpse of the painting -although a fake-that converts the narrator to the fanciful theory of Shakespeare's sonnets and it is the revelation of the beauty in his portrait that converts Dorian to Lord Henry's New Hedonism.

The power of images is well-understood by Wilde who therefore resorts to this simplified representation of his narcissism under the images of the exquisite young men in order to convert the public to his views. The mere argumentation for self-love, however clever and amusing , would not have been enough-he must pick up the painter's brushes and create *Imaginary Portraits*, following his master W. Pater.

Yet what is essential here is that the writer should leave the reader enough opportunity for identification. Just as the sins of Dorian Gray are never fully described, in order that the reader should be able to substitute them for his own wickedness, as the writer explains in a letter to an editor, his portrait is described in the haziest metaphorical and mythological terms: "this young Adonis who looks as if he were made of ivory and rose-leaves "(p. 7) being a typical instance of Wilde's descriptive style.

We have seen that the writer needs to resort images and may be pictorial or not as he chooses-Wilde never avails himself of the opportunity, probably due to his belief that the vaguer the image, the more it appeals to the imagination.

His portraits are not in any way identifiable and may in fact be easily mistaken for each other and so far as we can tell Dorian and the boy-actor might be one and the same person, while also resembling the young forger in the story, the Happy Prince or the Star-Child.

Nor is there anything really surprising about this for they all represent wishful constructs-the writer's ideal self.

The romance in *The Picture of Mr W H* is more artistic than the one in the novel because the model for the painting-if there was one- never shocks his admirers by making his appearance and so the whole story remains in the higher realm of fiction. Let us then begin by saying a few words about this story which argues the right of the artist to commit forgery in order to prove a theory.

As the reader undoubtedly remembers ,the story caused the anger of his contemporaries for what they perceived to be a covert plea in the name of the “love that dare not speak its name”

The story however can be discussed from a wider perspective, as arguing the right of the artist to waive aside moral concerns.

If art is the “new religion” as M: Arnold agreed, then it cannot be rational, or as Wilde puts it “there’s nothing sane about the worship of beauty”(p. 1144)As priests of beauty, the artists are entitled to any sacrifices ,of their own emotions and of truth itself, in order to fulfil their visions.

In this particular story, the young Cyril develops an interesting theory of Shakespeare’s sonnets as being dedicated to a boy-actor of his company with whom he was in love and who also inspired his plays .This interpretation is not corroborated by any external evidence, that would recall the “prying eyes” of critics, but by the careful reading of the sonnets themselves and by the recording of one’s own impressions-since it is clear that Cyril imaginatively identifies himself with this “onlie begetter” of the sonnets.

So far we have an illustration of Wilde’s theory of creative criticism and of criticism as a form of autobiography .The fruit of this applied criticism is a more artistically satisfying explanation of the sonnets as being the genuine expression of the artist’s passion and not a series of conventional poems dedicated to a rich patron, such as the Earl of Pembroke , as commentators believed

The mere elegance and beauty of this theory is enough to make it acceptable to those artistically-minded-but the Philistines will require evidence and thus tempt the young critic to commit forgery.

The point raised by Wilde is a particularly interesting one , claiming the right of the artist to re-write history and re-invent the so-called established facts.

If narrow-minded criticism troubles the artist with its “ shrill clamour” (p. 1110) , why shouldn’t the artist take his revenge on the critic by erasing the boundary between fact and fiction and depriving the Philistine of his objective knowledge?

Moreover, we have to consider the fact that all art is forgery, according to Plato and that the artist should have no scruples in the fashioning of his illusions; as Degas makes clear in his description of painting as “falsehood” requiring “as much cunning, trickery and vice as the perpetration of crime”.^v

From a purely artistic point of view there is no difference between forgery and a valuable work of art and seldom does the artist resort to the former without some intention of mocking the critics and proving to them the shallowness of their objective knowledge and the impossibility of judging fiction by the narrow standards of science. It is not only the painting that is forged-the whole story raises a host of doubts concerning its credibility. First of all, the protagonists of the story are dead and the narrator has only indirect knowledge of the theory as presented by his friend who was a friend of its author. Secondly, this narrator within the narrative who is presented as a scientific spirit all along, shatters his credibility at the very end by leaving a letter in which he presents his death as suicide for the sake of this literary theory while in fact it is the result of a long and undignified illness and this clearly casts doubt about the true reasons behind the suicide of Cyril, the author of the theory.

The framing narrative is as important as the theory itself-they both argue the right of the artist to extend his artistic interpretation to the events of his private life, counter-acting the critics who extend their ethic considerations to the artistic realm.

In the previous fairy-tales we have seen the artist's obligation to conceal his emotions-failing this, we now see his ability to sublimate or re-interpret them. The triumphant imagination may convert the love that dare not speak its name into an artistic experience, give it a higher significance.

The tension between life with its trivial temptations and art with its ideal beauty is solved here in favour of art and the artist.

Let us turn now to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and examine the tension between Love and Art, between model and artist.

The novel is an allegory of art, seeking to answer the question about the true subject behind the work of art. Is it the artist himself, as Basil Hallward claims^{vi}

and as Wilde himself had stated on various occasions? Or is it the spectator who assigns its meaning, as R Barthes had argued?

Perhaps it is the artist as spectator, the artist capable of detaching himself from his emotions and this explains Wilde's concession in the preface: "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors"(p. 17)

One thing seems to be clear-that the true subject of the painting is never the model, which has to be overcome for the work of art to emerge.

The same intuition is expressed by a variety of artists from E.A. Poe who in his *Oval Portrait* shows us the painter's wife gradually losing her colour which is translated onto the canvas and gaining immortality in exchange for her life to the anonymous author of the Eastern European ballad of Master Manole. It is the intuition of any artist with his insane worship of beauty to whom "nothing is of the slightest importance" compared to his art, as Wilde writes in *De Profundis* (p. 1001)

The reader perhaps remembers Manet's candid confession of his being obsessed by the wish to paint the portrait of his dying wife, being fascinated with the unusual colours-a portrait which he indeed painted shortly after her death- and also Matisse's revealing comment about his gradual distancing from the model^{vii}.

To the artist, everything must become the raw material of his creation. He must sublimate his emotions into abstract beauty, in other words to control the model, as Picasso explains rather cynically: "Pour faire le portrait d'un oiseau, il faut d'abord tordre son cou".

The artist begins by being fascinated with the model, but he has to defeat and subvert his source of inspiration, to refine nature into art. This is attempted by Basil who seeks to translate his passion for Dorian in artistic terms, as an embodiment of the Greek ideal and to dominate him, to make him a "motive" in his art.(p.16)

The fatal mistake of the artist is not that he falls in love with Dorian, not that he worships him madly, but that he loves him as he is, that he finds himself unable to contradict nature., in other words that he does not show himself enough of an artist.

This novel is a cunning argumentation for the amorality of art for while Basil and Dorian are seemingly punished for their sins, so as to satisfy the moral sense of the Philistines, the writer provides sufficient clues for the subtle reader to guess that they are in fact punished for not being imaginative and narcissistic enough.

It may be concluded that they represent the failed artist and the failed narcissist respectively, whereas Lord Henry represents the perfect type and for that reason is allowed to dominate the stage.

In his chapter on *The Aesthetics of Narcissism*, Berman makes the assumption that Wilde cannot resist the fascination of Lord Henry and is for this reason unable to chastise this character, yet I strongly doubt that Wilde had ever had such an intention. If he lets his readers believe that this is a moral story or at least a story with a moral ending in which Dorian is punished for his vanity and Basil for his worship of another man, this is only in order to make his narcissistic philosophy more acceptable because misunderstood.

In his own view, however, Basil's true mistake is presumably that of painting a realistic portrait and of allowing himself to be dominated by another. He is simply not selfish enough to be a great artist.

As for Dorian, his fatal mistake is again realism and narcissistic fixation, to define it in Freudian terms-instead of rejoicing in the beauty of his ideal image in the painting, he experiences "the rage of Caliban seeing his face in the glass". Instead of moving from this revelation of his beauty to the appreciation of Beauty, as Plato had envisaged, instead of transferring his interest to the realm of art, the only one in which perfection may be realised, he is jealous of his image and wishes to sacrifice it for his pleasure, thus reversing the myth of Narcissus.

It may be that Wilde wishes to demonstrate here the clear-cut difference between the creative narcissism of the dandy and the "feminine-minded", self-indulgent mirroring with which it was confused by the Philistines.

Dorian, as Huysmans' *Des Esseintes*, is not so much a caricature of the aesthete as the embodiment of the middle-class prejudices around this figure and it is for this reason that Wilde can afford to see him fail.

Dorian may wish to be a dandy and he possesses the beauty, the youth and the wealth that are all necessary for this accomplishment-nor does he lack the desire to be "more than a mere arbiter elegantiarum" (p. 148). But he is deprived of the dandy's most powerful means of seduction-his brilliant conversation.

Dorian is a mere echo of Lord Henry's ideas, as Lady Henry ruthlessly remarks at the beginning of the novel (p.54) and the attraction which both the artist and the dandy feel towards the young man is that of the pure mirror, as discussed in the third chapter, in which they both wish to see their perfect reflection.

This is made clear by the dispute between Basil and Lord Henry, which perhaps dramatises Wilde's own vacillation between artist and dandy. Both of them wish to

dominate Dorian Gray, both shroud in elaborate compliments their awareness of his mental inferiority, both regard him as a “lad “ and “foolish boy”-Lord Wotton insists that “he never thinks (p.7) while Basil refers to his “beautiful and simple nature”(p. 19)

Both regard him as more feminine-minded than themselves and therefore likely to be dominated by their genius.

Basil wishes to make him the symbol of his art, whereas Lord Henry admits that he wishes to “make that wonderful spirit his own”(p. 44) and Dorian indeed becomes his “creation”(p.68) , a situation that leads Berman to compare this novel to Shelley’ s *Frankenstein*.

A certain parallelism may indeed be observed between the mad scientist wishing to invent a new race that will bless him as their creator and the lord who is presented at one stage in the novel as a scientist experimenting with human emotions and who manages to create a new type: ”It was clear to him that the experimental method was the only method by which one could arrive at a scientific analysis of the passions; and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hand., and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results...”(p.69)

Yet in Shelley’ s novel the creator is chastised for his irresponsibility, while in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* he does not accept the blame for what is his creation. Basil accuses Lord Henry from the very beginning for the change of his friend’s attitude: ”This is your doing”(p. 33) and Dorian himself indirectly accuses Henry for his sins when telling him that he should never lend to anyone else the book that had altered the course of his life.

The defence of Lord Henry is dismissed somewhat hastily by Berman, who observes that Lord Henry’s crushing remark: ”The books that the world calls immoral are merely the books that show the world its own shame. That is all” echoes the assertion in the preface: ”There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all” and interprets this sweeping assertion as revealing uncertainty and potential guilt.

Yet after the discussion of artistic narcissism I hope that the reader will feel tempted to agree that Wilde has a point and this point-regardless of whether we agree with him or not-is the one revealed by Lord Henry in the sentences preceding the one we have

quoted: "art has no influence upon action. It is superbly sterile. It annihilates the desire to act."(p.248)

Dorian's fatal mistake is his lack of imagination, which makes him seek for perfection in life rather than in art, he is dominated by the jealousy of material things "whose beauty does not die"(p. 33) , by hatred which in artistic terms is defined as a "lack of imagination".

The strongest objection to this presentation of Dorian as the failed narcissistic type is probably Wilde's own assertion that in Dorian he had sketched his portrait, as he would have liked to be in a different age.

To this, we may only reply that in *De Profundis* he refers to Douglas as the model for Dorian and that it is precisely this lack of imagination and shallowness that he reproaches to Douglas.

We might also say with a certain degree of capriciousness that Dorian represents the artist's ideal up to a certain point, after which he becomes its very opposite.

Dorian may represent a "dream of form in days of thought" ,a kind of poetical licence or memory of romance, but it is Lord Henry who is the ideal of the narcissistic artist. Unmarred by common emotions and living exclusively in the realm of art, he is the dandy who charms all mirrors into reflecting his own idealised image. He is the supreme flatterer, telling Basil that "Genius lasts longer than Beauty" (p. 17) and confiding to Dorian that "Beauty is higher than Genius , as it needs no explanation"(p. 28) ,dominating not only his intimate friends but the whole of London society as shown from the account of the reception that seems to have been introduced in the novel so as to prove his absolute superiority over everyone else.

The artist whose portrait is sketched in the novel is the dandy as artist, the ideal that in order to fulfil in his fiction Wilde has had to renounce in his person. The Lord Henry who rejects Erskine's suggestion: "You talk books away. ..why don't you write one?"(p. 50) is the narcissist freed from all ambitions and dominating society purely by his sense of superiority, as Wilde himself would have liked to do.

Having seen the dandy's triumph, as achieved in Wilde's public life and fiction, most notably in the portrait of Lord Henry, we have now to examine the moment when he is finally made to pay his debt to society, the moment he had always anticipated ,knowing that "we are over-charged for everything nowadays".(*The Picture*, p. 90)

So will he manage to survive the Debtor's Yard where the "stones are hard /and the dripping wall is high"(p. 887) , the prison whose spectre had lurked in the background of his light-hearted society plays? Will he be a dandy to the very end and retain an ironic smile on his lips?

To find the answer to this question, we shall embark upon a new-and to the relief of writer and reader-last chapter.

ⁱ *More Letters of Oscar Wilde*, the letter to Mrs W.H.Grenfell, 1891

ⁱⁱ Luca Giordano quoted by Palomino, quoted by Stoichiță in *Efectul Don Quijote*, p. 55

ⁱⁱⁱ p.243, *Istoria ilustrată a picturii*, 1973, translation of the 1971 edition , Paris, F.Hazan

^{iv} *Major Works*, p.621:Freud distinguishes between the anacritic and the narcissistic types of object-love and concludes that "the homosexual choice of object is originally more closely related to narcissism than the heterosexual", while in his first paper *On Narcissism*, p. 399 in the quoted edition he had confirmed Sadger' s findings that the narcissistic "aberration" is usually accompanied by other types of perversion, as for instance homosexuality

^v quoted by Hudson in *Bodies of knowledge*, p. 90

^{vi} p. 10:"Every portrait painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter"

^{vii} quoted in *Erotique de l'art*, p.38: "Ce modèle est pour moi un tremplin, c'est une porte que je dois enfoncer pour accéder au jardin dans lequel je suis seul et si bien ,même le modèle n'existe que pour ce qui'il me sert.

A Long and Lovely Suicide

Now tell me of my father .Stood he tall?
 I warrant he looked tall upon his horse...
 Did he ride singly or with many squires
 And valiant gentlemen to serve his taste?
 For oftentimes methinks I feel my veins
 Beat with the blood of kings. Was he a king?
 Ay, of all men he was the kingliest.
 Then when you saw my noble father last
 He was set high above the heads of men?
 Ay, he was high above the heads of men,
 On a red scaffold, with a butcher's block
 Set for his neck
 (Oscar Wilde-*The Duchess of Padua*)

In the previous chapters we have seen the narcissism of the adolescent who is seated at the centre with the Immortals, contemplating everything with the untamed criticism of youth and the narcissism of the dandy who places himself in the centre of society by means of his magical mirror; the narcissism of the lover to whom the Other is a flattering self-reflection and the narcissism of the artist, who recreates the whole world into his image.

The time has now come to take the last step into the myth and to see how the conflict between the mysterious self and the ideal image may only be solved in death, that will unite the artist to his image.

In an early letter , Wilde had already referred to the artistic life as “a long and lovely suicide”ⁱ and this is certainly true to the extent that the artist has to learn the lesson that “all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling”, to subordinate emotion to technique and the general design and sacrifice the accidents of personality for the sake of perfect beauty.

The artistic ideal implies a high degree of renunciation, which accounts for Flaubert's portrayal of the artist under the guise of St Anthony -the artist, as the saint, isolates himself in a world of dreams, renouncing passions and ambition and dedicating himself to an abstract ideal of beauty.

This association of ideas leads to the visualisation of the artist as martyr, a possibility that emerges already in Wilde's poem on Keats "Fair as Sebastian and as early slain" and which is fully exploited later on with the occasion of a trial.

It is a proof of Wilde's extraordinary charisma and imaginative power that his interpretation of the trial as a martyrdom of art has impressed many critics and is still accepted today, in total oblivion of the fact that the trial had nothing to do with his art and that, as a more lucid commentator points out, some of the accusations brought against him would have still got him convicted in the year 2000.

Standing in the dock, surrounded by a host of Philistines, by aesthetes who did not easily forgive him for bringing ridicule upon the movement, bisexuals who privately condemned him for his lack of discretion that caused unnecessary attention to their activities, faced with an astonished wife and a self-absorbed lover, Wilde finds the strength to re-interpret the trivial facts as artistic experiments, both during the trial and in his letter that would be published posthumously.

Cross-examined about his acquaintance with men that were hardly of his class, in fact the circle of young prostitutes, he takes advantage of the occasion to voice another extravagant praise of youth which was in itself an art; asked to explain Douglas' poem, he delivers the famous speech on Platonic love, which he defines in purely intellectual terms and asked if he has ever loved another man, he humours the audience by stating what was indeed the essence of his creed: "I have never loved anyone but myself"

All of these speeches produce the desired impression upon the audience. The judge is indeed repelled by Wilde's homosexuality, but we have no reason to identify this attitude with that of the entire Victorian audience in the way that is done by several commentators, for instance Aldington who talks about "hatred of art" as one of the "few genuine emotions of the English-speaking peoples".ⁱⁱ

Wilde was not a misunderstood genius living in isolation-he was an extremely successful writer and the charmer of London society, even during the infamous trial. We have also to consider the fact that the delay in arresting him would have enabled him to leave the country and avoid prison, as is confirmed by many separate testimonies.

His decision to remain in London may be regarded as the last step in the long and lovely suicide, thus obliging the reluctant public to canonise him.

It is not that Wilde believed in martyrdom-his views on the subject are clearly expressed in *The Portrait of Mr W H* wherein he states that "No man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them is not true". (p 349)

Despite his toying with the idea of artist as martyr, he is never really seduced by it-and it is only when he realises that he has lost his position in London society, his prestige as an artist, that he decides to sacrifice his life to redeem his image-just as the modern version of Narcissus was supposed to do.

It will be objected perhaps that the writer did not know that the sentence would cost him his life and yet we have every reason to believe that he at least suspected it-it is not that as Camus writes, before reaching prison, he was not aware even of the existence of such places-the sympathetic review he had written of the prison poems of his compatriot W. Blunt and his previous study of Wainewright in which referring to the latter's conviction, he states that such a sentence was "to a man of his culture a form of death"(p. 1104) show that he was sufficiently aware of the hardships of life in prison and of the effect the sentence would have upon him.

Yet he could not desert his image ,the image to which he had given his whole life and so he decided to remain and defend it-and if he may have been bored telling lies to an old lawyer, as he claims in *De Profundis*, the actor and playwright in him must have at least partially enjoyed the performance, the opportunity to put in practice the art of lying that he had commended in his essay.

This attempt to lend life the dignity of fiction, which had been obstructed in the trial by the intrusion of sordid facts , is continued in *De Profundis*, the letter ostensibly addressed to Douglas and yet clearly aimed at posterity and wishing to re-construct his reputation from its ruins.

This letter, as well as the *Ballad*, will impress Camus into believing in Wilde's conversion from the shallow dandy into a genuine artist, capable of understanding suffering and the value of ordinary experiences and ordinary people.

It is certainly true that Wilde verbally repents his excesses, his dandyism, but this need not be taken more seriously than his denunciation of homosexuality as a disease in the hope of being granted a reduction of his sentence. Wilde was a diplomat and a skilful orator, knowing how to gain the public on this side and his denunciation of his excesses is probably not more than such an apparent concession. What interests him is to secure his future glory.

As for the numerous passages on the value of suffering, they represent Wilde's attempt to re-interpret artistically what had already occurred. As he admits: "While there were times when I rejoiced in the idea that my sufferings were to be endless, I

could not bear them to be meaningless” and so by of a subtle casting he talks of Christ as the supreme artist and praises his love as a form of the imagination.

It is ,as in his previous fiction, self-glorification that is to be found at the bottom of it-the dandy’s cult of the self surviving all illusions of himself.ⁱⁱⁱ

For Wilde is deeply aware of the sordid character of his tragedy, and of Douglas’ inadequacy as his lover, as many of the passages in the letter reveal.

Yet just as Erskine had preferred to give an artistic meaning to his death, Wilde prefers to give a beautiful interpretation to his life and to his death, as this passage clearly shows: ”Do you really think that at any period in our friendship you were worthy of the love I showed you, or that for a single minute I thought you were?...In less than three years you have entirely ruined me from every point of view .For my own sake there was nothing for me to do but love you. I knew, if I allowed myself to hate you, that in the dry desert of existence over which I had to travel, and am travelling still, every rock would lose its shadow ,every palm tree be withered, every well of water prove poisoned at its source”(p.1005)

The reader will perhaps agree that the love Wilde talks about is nothing more than a beautiful image, a charming construction put on rather trivial facts. And that he is fully aware of it-but in perfect accord with the dandy that had always been his ideal, he is content to create beauty-to create beautiful meanings out of ordinary events.

Perhaps he already senses that he will never create anything ever again, but before he rests, he has still to fashion his legend, to indicate the path for the exegesis of his work. As he had let one of his dandies say: ”the one duty we owe history is to re-write it”(p. 1121) and in *De Profundis* we have a glimpse of the man who knows that: “what I have before me is the past” and that since it would be impossible to deny what is public knowledge, all that remains is to re.-interpret his story, “to make the world look on it with different eyes” .

And in this, as in his previous adventures of the imagination, he is undoubtedly successful. He gives a meaning , however fictitious, to what was a tragedy a little lacking in form and it is my impression that when Camus imagines his *Outsider*, it is of Wilde that he is thinking. Meursault, as Wilde, is “the only Christ we deserve “^{iv},the hedonistic victim of a hypocritical society.-the only difference being that Meursault is convicted for his sincerity whereas Wilde agrees with Hugo that affectation is “the only thing that accompanies a man up the steps of the scaffold”(p. 349) .

Camus is led by his own artistic prejudices to consider *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis* as Wilde's best creations, his "royal heritage"^{iv} and a late discovery of his potential genius, for the first time in contact with the vital sources of inspiration, with the life of the common people.

It would be ungraceful to point out to the inner contradictions and flaws of these works of art, of whose imperfection the author was fully aware, but we shall content ourselves with observing that it is strange that an author such as Camus should prefer them to the exquisite creations *The Importance of Being Earnest* or *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. Perhaps it is true that creativity is limiting and the true artist can conceive of no other style than his own, as Wilde had stated in *The Critic as Artist*, perhaps it is that as Lord Henry says, "it is much easier to sympathise with suffering than with thought".

The trial has increased the notoriety of Wilde, but it has also expanded his relevance from that of an artistic suicide to the champion of various causes, from Irishness to aestheticism and homosexuality. And yet of all people Wilde was least likely to embrace any cause and I would say that his narcissism was the most constant thing about him. In *De Profundis*, the letter which Camus interprets as expressing his sympathy with the whole world of suffering, he still makes it clear, asserting his individualism in a number of passages, considering that his mistake was that of his appealing to the society whose rules and institutions he had mocked all his life.

What is revealed in the whole letter is the love of his image, as reflected in his art, for as he makes clear, "between my art and the world there is now a wide gulf, but between Art and myself there is none" (p. 1040) and the individualistic and artistic ideal is re-affirmed with even greater conviction:

And it is the same individualism that is asserted in the *Ballad*. Even while the writer adopts, as Dante, the anonymity of a soul in pain and even if he seems to lament the suffering of another, it is from his own sense of solitude and of having been unfairly treated that this poem springs. Do we not remember Wilde's observation: "Give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth?" The least poetical passages in the poem are those in which he laments his own discomfort and the most poetical ones those in which he expresses his longing for freedom in the persona of the death-convict.

As for the reality of suffering, it is not a poem that may convey it, nor is it the artist's wish to convey it. His true message is that in the refrain: "Yet each man kills the thing

he loves", which in his case is the recognition of his suicidal act, the regret for the artistic life that he sacrificed to an image.

"The forms of fear" that fill the prison resemble nothing in the imagination of ordinary men, but the grotesque marionettes in *The Harlot's House* and perhaps Wilde's worst punishment is the theatrical aspect of the whole situation, which he cannot help perceiving. Some passages in the poem are on the verge of nonsense poetry, as for instance these lines: "It is sweet to dance to violins/when Love and Life are fair:/To dance to flutes, to dance to lutes/Is delicate and rare/But it is not sweet with nimble feet/To dance upon the air". It is as if the phantoms from his past life come to mock him and what is most difficult for him to bear of prison-life is undoubtedly the humiliation.

The dandy who had only allowed the world to see him with his exquisite mask is now a clown in a ridiculous outfit and the look of the other, which he had long learnt how to subdue, now humiliates him: "Or else he sat with those who watched his anguish night and day;/Who watched him when he rose to weep/And when he crouched to pray..."

The anonymity of ordinary prisoners is not granted to him and this is his punishment, but also his gift: "For he who lived more lives than one/More deaths than one must die"

And these lines seem to anticipate his future resurrections and killings in the name of various causes and in the subsequent trials between Robbie Ross and Alfred Douglas, between Maud Allen and Noel Pemberton Billing.

What Wilde would have thought of this immense publicity and his conversion into a popular hero is not hard to tell: "There is one thing worse than being talked about and that is not being talked about."

He would have welcomed his extraordinary fame, flattered all of his disciples and rejoiced even more in the existence of his enemies whose very existence proves that his ideas are still dangerous and vital. Narcissism or the love of one's image, which he made the basis of his art and life, is still very much misunderstood-and that could only have pleased the dandy who wished to charm, but not to instruct. For doesn't the vitality of a myth depend on its ambiguity?

ⁱ *Selected Letters*, p. 64: "Only one thing remains infinitely fascinating to me-the mystery of moods. To be the master of these moods is exquisite, to be mastered by them more exquisite still. Sometimes I think that the artist's life is a long and lovely suicide and am not sorry that it is so".

ⁱⁱ *The Portable Oscar Wilde*, p. 40-Aldington accuses Wilde of unwittingly providing the Philistines with one of their most resounding victories by means of his trial: "It may be said of him that he helped unintentionally to prolong the barbarism of the nations"

ⁱⁱⁱ Baudelaire, quoted by Lemaire, p. 117 "C' est une espèce de culte de soi-même qui peut survivre à la recherche du bonheur à trouver dans autrui, dans la femme par exemple ; qui peut survivre à tout ce qu'on appelle les illusions"

^{iv} 1955 *Avant-propos*

^v *L'artiste en prison*, p.17

Conclusions

The choice of the narcissistic perspective in discussing the work of Wilde has proved fortunate and at the end of this paper so much has been left unsaid that it could form the subject of an entirely new essay. Most of the discarded material belongs to the last chapter, which ought to be re-written with greater emphasis on the suicidal line of thought as revealed in Wilde's early writing, most notably in *Vera*, and also in his lifelong, although mild attraction to nihilism as the new type of martyrdom.

The third and fourth chapters should be re-written to include a more comprehensive analysis of the destructive or paralysing aspect of narcissism as of love in general-what has been touched upon as the Gorgon-like aspect of Dorian Gray.

The creative potential of narcissism has been emphasised as part of Wilde's original treatment of the theme-on the other hand, its life-denying aspect has been played down and the fiction of Wilde has been regarded not so much in connection as in opposition to the French decadent tradition

Yet a more argumentative, carefully balanced presentation, would not have allowed us to cover all the narcissistic themes announced in the introduction. The coherence and relevance and artistic value of the narcissistic patterns in the writings of Wilde, which it had been the point of this essay to prove, have been illustrated to the author's satisfaction.

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